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POST-MILLENNIAL QUEER SENSIBILITY: COLLABORATIVE AUTHORSHIP AS  
DISIDENTIFICATION IN QUEER INTERTEXTUAL COMMODITIES

by

TANYA D. ZUK

Under the Direction of Ethan Tussey, PhD

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is examining LGBTQ+ audiences and creatives collaborating in the creation of new media texts like web shows, podcasts, and video games. The study focuses on three main objects or media texts: *Carmilla* (web series), *Welcome to Night Vale* (podcast), and *Undertale* (video game). These texts are transmedia objects or intertextual commodities. I argue that by using queer gestures of collaborative authorship that reaches out to the audience for canonical contribution create an emerging queer production culture that disidentifies with capitalism even as it negotiates capitalistic structures. The post-millennial queer sensibility is a constellation of aesthetics, self-representation, alternative financing, and interactivity that prioritizes community, trust, and authenticity using new technologies for co-creation.

Within my study, there are four key tactics or queer gestures being explored: remediation, radical ambiguity and multi-forms as queer aesthetics, audience self-representation, alternative financing like micropatronage & licensed fan-made merchandise, and interactivity as performance. The goal of this project is to better understand the changing conceptions of authorship/ownership, canon/fanon (official text/fan created extensions), and community/capitalism in queer subcultures as an indicator of the potential change in more mainstream cultural attitudes. The project takes into consideration a variety of intersecting identities including gender, race, class, and of course sexual orientation in its analysis. By examining the legal discourse around collaborative authorship, the real-life production practices, and audience-creator interactions and attitudes, this study provides insight into how media creatives work with audiences to co-create self-representative media, the motivations, and rewards for creative, audiences, and owners. This study aims to contribute towards a fuller understanding of queer production cultures and audience reception of these media texts, of which there is relatively little academic information. Specifically, the study mines for insights into the changing attitudes towards authorship, ownership, and collaboration within queer indie media projects, especially as these objects are relying on the self-representation of both audiences and creatives in the formation of the text.

**INDEX WORDS:** Queer gesture, Transmedia, LGBTQ+, Cocreation, New media, Audience reception

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by

TANYA D. ZUK

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2021

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Tanya D. Zuk  
2021

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DISIDENTIFICATION IN QUEER INTERTEXTUAL COMMODITIES

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Georgia State University

December 2021

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my many families. First and foremost, to my family of two with my wife Thia—the love of my life and supportive partner who held my hand through these tumultuous years. To our furry children here and gone whose purring comforted in stressful times. Thia this is such a small token in exchange for all the love and support you have provided me over the years, but you can *finally* introduce us as Dr. and Mrs. Zuk.

I dedicate this to my family of birth, the crazy complicated mess that we are. To my mother, Catherine Costello who was always on the other side of the phone line. To my father Rolf Zuk, whose teasing and laughter spurred me on. To my stepfather, Raymond Costello, who I desperately wished was around to be able to say, “My daughter, the doctor.” To Sonia, my other mother, a quiet supportive voice. To Monica, Griffin, Nadia, and all of my many other siblings, nieces, and nephews—you crazy lot of love. May you all know that you are a part of my success.

To my chosen family—my friends and community of support, queer and otherwise. Your laughter, light, and sometimes zany antics reminded me that there is a balance between life and work. I want to thank (in no particular order): Andy & Merrill, Ashley, Kos, Krystal, John & Chaka, Daniel, Mariel & Jared, and all the many Katies, Kathleens, and Katherines in my life. You provided a lifeline when I felt like sinking.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

IRL	In Real Life
PMQS	Post-Millennial Queer Sensibility
QIC	Queer Intertextual Commodity
Ship	Short for shipping or the act of rooting for a relationship.
<i>WtNV</i>	<i>Welcome to Night Vale</i>

## 1 PROJECT ORIGIN STORY, AN INTRODUCTION

An introduction is like the origin story or backstory to a main character—sometimes the hero and other times the villain, but always important to the genesis of the story. The introduction that follows will tell you about foundational theory, methods, and even participant demographics, but it doesn't tell you *why* I was compelled to tell *this story*—why these media objects and audiences spoke to me. It may surprise you, especially since I am a fan studies scholar, to know that I am not an avid social media user. Instead, I rely on friends, family, and later, participants, to inform me about media objects and texts. It's through this loose but networked recommendation process that I was introduced to the major examples and case studies presented here: *Carmilla* (a web series), *Welcome to Night Vale* (a podcast), and *Undertale* (a video game). Though these media texts are from different mediums, formats, and genres, I felt that they shared a common feeling—a shared sensibility that I couldn't pinpoint, but as a queer person felt an affinity with. This project was a process of determining what underlying qualities and core values these objects shared and what that implies about alternative queer media in a post-millennial digital era.

Ultimately, each of these texts have a moment (or many moments) where they breakdown the boundaries between canon/fanon, industry/audience, and text/metatext. Whether that is the creators of *Night Vale* declaring that every head canon of Cecil is equally true — creating a multiform character, or the actress Elise Bauman “touching herself” by commenting on her character Laura Hollis's social media feed (*Carmilla*), each of these media objects break down fundamental barriers between the imaginary and the real world in a meaningful way. They can play with the “magic circle” and its boundaries precisely because of who is involved in their

creation and who the text engages with—a queer audience who has long since trusted alternative media to have a shared humanist morality, even if it is still situated in capitalism.

### **1.1 Foundational Thoughts**

This project examines the ways in which audiences and content creators in queer alternative new media projects collaborate to create complex intertextual and transmedia story worlds. Worlds that I contend “disidentify” with the oppressive power structures linked to the normative cultures of heteronormativity, structural racism, and particularly capitalism. José Estaban Muñoz (1999) describes the mental state of disidentification as to simultaneously identify with and actively against a representation and the ideology that created it (p. 11). Here “disidentificatory desire” is a longing for visibility but against assimilation, for inclusion but against violence, and for economy but against exploitation (Muñoz, 1999, p. 23).

Structurally, the media projects or queer intertextual commodities presented here are from different new media formats but all are bound by a “magic circle” (Huizanga, 1955) similar to that of playing a game, in which both audience members and content creators consent to abide by a set of shared expectations—expectations based in trust. Trust was the most often used concept (if not the exact word) from the participants in this study. It was used by both audience members and traditional content creators when describing how their relationship was different from mainstream media’s relationship with its audiences. When we talk about trust as a foundation of the queer intertextual commodity and the individuals, both audience and creatives, playing within it, we are not talking only about the trust in a shared set of rules, but a trust that we will not inflict pain on one another—that we will strive towards an ethics of care (Fiona, 2011; hooks, 1994; Vanlaere & Burggraeve, 2020). Trust is the corner stone of authenticity, collaboration, and community—fundamental ideas to queer survival in a capitalist culture.

Though the magic circle concept is associated with games studies, Johan Huizanga (1955) originally created the metaphor to describe “play” within culture, and as a foundational concept of culture. What is society if not a set of rules we all agree to abide by? Therefore, the magic circle and play more generally function as a social contract between people. In game studies, the magic circle can be understood as a permeable boundary between play and work, the real and the imaginary, and the physical and the virtual. To play in the queer intertextual commodity one must enter the magic circle created by trust and play with text through the queer gestures of collaborative authorship. Here, disidentification becomes a form of play that productively collapses the boundary of the magic circle.

This project relies heavily on queer of color criticism for its theoretical underpinnings. In particular, it utilizes José Estaban Muñoz’s (2009; 1999) concepts of disidentification and queer utopia, as well as Juana Maria Rodriguez’s (2014) variation of the queer gesture. It is with some trepidation that I, a cis white (if queer) woman, utilize queer of color critique. Particularly, on a project with media texts dominated by white content creators and audience respondents. However, the central focus of this project is on queer negotiations of capitalist culture from which race cannot be divorced. Further, like Kara Keeling (2007) before me, I am exploring media content and affordances linked to anti-capitalist sentiments within the queer community, which by its very nature must be intersectional and take into consideration differences of race, class, gender expression, and disability.

Woven throughout the case studies will be discussions of the ways in which these media objects succeed and fail to embrace intersectionality, particularly in regard to race. But more importantly, it will examine the ways in which audience and creatives work together to negotiate and/or disidentify to create heteroglossic space in which intersectionality becomes central. Taking

on Rukmini Pande's (2018) call to examine the "theoretical whitewashing," or the use of racialized genre and academic tropes in fan studies, this project addresses racialized representations or their lack in both *Welcome to Night Vale* and *Carmilla* (p. 6). Further, it examines the various ways in which fans correct the perception of the audience's whiteness and the default to whiteness within the canonical content. Taking into consideration the racialized experience of fandom, queerness, and capitalist culture is essential to understanding the post-millennial queer sensibility.

This project focuses primarily on queer alternative new media and in particular the audience's experience of these texts. It takes into consideration content creators and their placement in a larger queer production culture. And of course, it takes the text itself, its medium specificity—its affordances and limitations into consideration. Examining the relationships between audience, text, and content creators I believe that queer production culture which tends to focus on creator self-representation and authenticity (Christian, 2018; Coon, 2018; Martin, 2018) is blending with cocreation (Christian, 2019; Cizek et al., 2019; Cizek & Uricchio, 2019) as a tactic of survival for both audience and content creators.

While the chapters that follow use more than fifteen examples, and two case studies, they are representative of more than seventy-five objects identified by research participants — audience members and content creators alike. Objects in the study include web series, podcasts, video games, webcomics, social media storytelling, and virtual reality experiences. Each are designed by content creators to allow audiences to participate in some meaningful (if often small) way in the creation of the text.

The case studies for the dissertation are the web series *Carmilla* and the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale (WtNV)*. These case studies were selected because each extensively and

deliberately create “multiforms” or heterotopic elements that allow for audience members to meaningfully and persistently contribute to their respective worlds (Murray, 1997). Each uses distinctly different methods to accomplish this phenomenon, respective to their medium. Further, they are the two projects with the largest response from survey participants (*WtNV* 35% and *Carmilla* 21%). Additionally, I was fortunate enough to be able to attend multiple in-person events for each series. For *Carmilla*, I was able to attend ClexaCon which had three *Carmilla* panels and meet-ups. Whereas for *Welcome to Night Vale*, I attended panels at DragonCon and a live show: “Spy in the Desert.” As such, *Carmilla* and *WtNV* are the best-case studies to showcase the larger phenomenon described throughout this work.

## 1.2 Being/Doing Queer

Within this project there are two conceptualizations of the term “queer.” The first is identity and subjectivity based and the second is function or process based. This could be understood as “being queer” and “doing queer;” or in terms of media, representing queer people and queering the medium’s affordances. Being and Doing are interlocked; one cannot be queer without doing queer and vice-versa. Likewise, a post-millennial queer project cannot just “play queer” (Ruberg, 2019) with the medium without also considering and including LGBTQ+ people in production and audience. Here I will outline the literature around these two conceptualizations of queer and how they work together within the larger post-millennial queer sensibility.

### 1.2.1 Queerness as Identity or Subjectivity

To begin, Alexander Doty’s (1993) expression of queerness as an “attitude... that begins in a place not concerned with, or limited by, notions of a binary opposition of male and female or the homo versus hetero paradigm” (p. xv). For Doty queerness is an inclusive not exclusive label, and one need not give up previously defined and internalized conceptualizations of the self to

also establish an essence or aura of queerness. Queerness as an identity is used by audiences as an opt-in umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities. In fact, 71% of survey respondents selected queerness as a “way of being,” and all interview subjects in this study verbalized queerness as an identity descriptor. Ultimately, queer identification is based not only by sex and gender expression, but by relationship and community and does not preclude ally-ship as an element of queer subjectivity.

In mundane conversation queer can collectively refer to LGBTQ+ individuals and in the broader sense the “odd, irregular, and idiosyncratic” (Rand, 1995, p. 11) — those who are non-normative in some way. Historically, the acronym LGBTQ has been used to identify the larger homosexual community. However, I use an additional plus sign to signify the inclusion of a plethora of additional gender and sexual minorities including, but not limited to, asexual, pansexual, demisexual, intersex, genderqueer, nonbinary, gender fluid, homoromantic, and those in the polyamory community. Many of these socio-political identities are newly named and constructed, and therefore have not been included specifically in LGBTQ studies previously. However, in the post-millennial queer sensibility these identities are commonly included in the general understanding of the term “queer” and are included here as such.

If queerness as an identity is an opt-in umbrella of protection, we cannot ignore the various other identities that individuals within the queer umbrella must also negotiate, including class, disability, ethnicity, language, and particularly race. Queerness as an identity must therefore be intersectional. Defined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality denotes “the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s experiences” (p. 1244). She further states that intersectionality is structural (a lived experience), political (a legal oppression), and representational (culturally constructed) (p. 1245).



However, within the queer umbrella we can see, “the social power in delineating difference need not be the power of domination, but instead be the source of social empowerment and reconstruction” (p. 1242) as Crenshaw suggests. Queerness as an identity and community is about “coalition building” across oppressed minorities in an effort to not only survive but to affect changes that support and protect the most marginalized of the group (Cohen, 2005).

### ***1.2.2 Queerness as Function or Process***

Teresa de Lauretis (1991) argues that queerness is a “process whose mode of functioning is both interactive and yet resistant, both participatory and yet distinct, claiming at once equality and difference” (iii). Thus, queerness as a function is an ongoing process, that continuously fluctuates and incorporates thoughts and values; through specific performances, behaviors, or actions, which are left to interpretation. Doing queer can be envisioned as part of a “social operating system” (Keeling, p. 153). Kara Keeling (2014) explains in *Queer OS*, that doing queer “unsettles the common senses that secure those presently hegemonic social relations that can be characterized by domination, exploitation, oppression, and other violences” (p. 154).

In this study, nearly a quarter of survey participants expressed a connection with “doing queer” over “being queer.” Of those, 15% of participants defined queer as a way of “interacting with the world.” Another 4% specifically associated queer interaction as a form of protest. Finally, 5% stated that “doing queer” was “thinking queer.” Doing queer “insists upon forging and facilitating uncommon, irrational, imaginative, and/or unpredictable relationships... in the interest of creating value(s) that facilitate just relations” (Keeling, 2014, p. 154). To do queer is to create space outside the normative not only for oneself, but for others—who may not look or be like you. “Queerness, as its heart, can be defined as the desire to live life otherwise, by questioning and living outside normative boundaries” (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017, p. x).

### *1.2.3 Post-Millennial Queer*

Pulling from these two concepts of what it is to be “queer,” one can extrapolate that queerness, and certainly “Post-Millennial Queerness,” is dialectical in nature—both being and doing. As a discourse in constant flux, queerness investigates the binary oppositions and intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and normativity/deviance in search for the radical possibility in the spaces that are between and those that intermesh. For both Alexander Doty and bell hook’s these queer spaces are described as locations for the marginalized to create “sites of resistance” that provide a safe haven for “radical openness and possibility” (Doty, p. 3) for all who identify as queer (LGBTQ+).

The Post-Millennial Queer Sensibility is rooted in alternative media’s long-standing practice of minority self-representation—content made by and for the LGBTQ+ community. This grassroots content has since been co-opted for commercial endeavors such as Logo’s “gaystreaming,” which attempts to normalize gay representation by muting difference (Ng, 2013). However, the Post-Millennial Queer Sensibility goes a step farther requiring content creators and audiences alike to perform queerness as an ongoing process, as an action. To function queerly by othering the structures of heteronormative, racist, and capitalist culture, including medium and technology affordances, representation, and behavior. Queerness is an action or an interaction with the world, whether through a media object, community, or individual.

In game studies, Bonnie Ruberg (2019) describes “playing queer” as the “powerful act of playing the ‘wrong’ way” (p. 18). By playing queerly audiences reimagine the game, embracing the belief in multiplicity, as there may be only one way to “correctly” play, but there are an infinite number of ways to play queerly (or “wrong”). The post-millennial queer sensibility is a

type of playing queer—“a mode of self-expression, a mode of taking pleasure, and a mode of resistance that opens itself to all players” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 19). And in opening itself up to everyone the post-millennial queer sensibility must trust in the authentic community that collaborates in creating a heterotopic space open to all—that centers the marginalized.

### **1.3 Collaborative Authorship**

I examine the concept and role of authorship in intertextual commodities rather than copyright or ownership because almost all media projects from literature, films, television, and games have multiple authors but generally a sole corporate owner who holds the copyright and the profits. However, the author would not be considered the corporation, but the groups of people who worked on these projects, and often the single "auteur" or driving creative behind the project. There is a long lineage of looking at legacy media's collaborative authorship including John Caldwell, David P. Marshall, Terry Flew, John Hartley, and Derek Johnson and of course in fan studies we can point to a variety of scholars examining fan works and labor Suzanne Scott, Tiziana Terranova, Nico Carpenter, Mel Stanfill and Kristen Thompson. Where my work differs is in the examination of audiences as sanctioned or official collaborators in intertextual commodities with agency to contribute and retract content through social media feeds, gameplay, and artistry.

By employing shared authorship as a central concept, I am re-framing capitalist culture through queer theory, blurring boundaries of inclusion, agency, and worth — looking at communal labor as both gift and commodity. Authorship works as a “mediator of aesthetics and meaning, as an act of power and control, as industrial strategy, as something to be practiced something to be contested, and something to be won, awarded, denied, hoarded, and/or shared”

(Gray & Johnson, 2013, p. 6). By sharing authorship with audiences in small and large ways, queer intertextual commodities are sharing power, and negotiating capitalist culture.

### ***1.3.1 Legal***

Authorship and copyright ownership have been conflated, and U.S. copyright law has particularly been mired down with the long-term impact on the delineation of public/private intellectual property law since the 1909 revision.<sup>1</sup> Legally, the author is the identity who bears the portable rights in their artistic property (Jaszi, 1994, p. 30). However, works created collectively, collaboratively or communally (i.e. folkloric cultural productions, remix cultural productions) are marginalized in legal terms, or “become literally invisible within the prevailing ideological framework of discourse in copyright” (Jaszi, 1994, p. 38). Lawrence Lessig, a lawyer and scholar, outlined the impact of copyright law’s focus on individualistic authorship on folk or remix culture in his books *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (2000) and *Remix* (2008). He has also created the user-friendly system, Creative-Commons, to help lay-people to work within the current copyright system by providing permissions to future remixers.

The legal system as a whole and copyright lawyers in particular have been investigating the quandary of collaborative authorship, particularly collaborative authorship that is mediated online and not under work-for-hire contracts. Currently, the law prioritizes “texts” that have a single author, creator, or corporate owner, but with the growth of collaborative media and new-networked technologies and infrastructures, this approach to authorship is quickly being contested.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1909 copyright revision was the last time that copyright was designed to prioritize the creation and management of public domain instead of authorial rights.

Robert H. Rotstein in “Beyond Metaphor Copyright Infringement and the Fiction of the Work” has created an alternative approach to copyright, which reconceives copyright’s subject from a discreet work to a fluid text (Rotstein, 1993). Keith Aoki goes even further to suggest we view the fluid text (any networked communication or intertextual work) described by Rotstein as a public “text-as-speech act” and therefore not copyrighted or property to be owned, opening up the text to the public as commons. Aoki quickly acknowledges that this “re-imagining of copyright for intertextual works includes the potential for abuse (regulation of speech) and the commodification of the intertextual expression (exploitation)” (Aoki, 1992, p. 826). However, it would open up copyright law for collaborative authorship, remix, and transformative works. Ultimately, the polyvocal writing practice of collaborative authorship is legally difficult to define, utilize, and protect. When we reframe the act of cocreation as a queer gesture that prioritizes the authorial relationship over copyright ownership (though both are still present) there is a potential for a queering or disidentification of copyright’s inherent connection to capital.

### ***1.3.2 Cultural***

The social and cultural concept of “the author” is generally derived from the romanticism period of literature, which embraced the lonely, tortured artist ethos and it is this “cultural figuration of the ‘author,’ as the inspired creator of unique works of art” that has permeated not only our popular memory but our legal system as well (Jaszi, 1994, p. 30). Further, the romantic notion of “the author” has overwritten practical, amateur, and collective artistic practices as culturally inferior, despite the permeation of these works in our everyday lives.

According to Marlon B. Ross (1994) the author “traverses the gulf between self and other, assumes and claims that we can transmit, and thus transmute, our experience of knowledge, by transporting that knowledge to a public space where experience itself is knowable, shareable, and answerable” (p. 231). However, Ross then spends the next 20-pages explaining that there is no difference between the at-home “scribbler” from the published “author” except for “sociohistorical distinction.”

It is that distinction that is further problematized by Foucault’s “What is an Author?” which questions the move to privilege *individualization* in the notion of ‘the author.’ Moreover, the concept of individual authorship was not a natural cultural phenomenon, but instead was just one of many ways in which to constrain the proliferation of meaning (Foucault, 1969). Culturally we can understand that “Authorship is therefore about control, power, and the management of meaning and of people as much as it is about creativity and innovation” (Gray & Johnson, 2013, p. 4).

Ultimately, queering capitalism as a concept is about the disruption of capitalist culture through the sharing of authorship. As Keith Aoki (1992) states,

The author is a powerful metaphor as well as metaphor for power (“author”-ize, “author”-ity, “auth”-entic, etc.)... and to transform the valence of that power, we must first understand how the figure of the author continues working to constrict what legal thought considers to be a threatening proliferation of meaning (p. 825).

It is with the communal sharing of authorship that these projects begin to queer capitalist culture and problematize the power dynamics of authority, copyright, and ownership.

### ***1.3.3 Theoretical***

A new approach to authorship would protect the rights of all participants in collaborative media, which is defined by Jonas Löwgren and Bo Reimer as "a particular cultural form for collaborative, mediated practice" that relies on action-oriented structures—both digital and

analog networks (2013, p. 15). In fact, Löwgren and Reimer view collaboration and authorship as relative and not absolute terms, as part of an ongoing process of design, consumption, and production that creates a text using a generally pre-existing infrastructure where multiple individuals contribute towards the text (2013, p. 22-27). This process extends creation outwards and can include the audience/user as contributors towards the newest iteration of the text.

When this process is applied to emergent media platforms and technologies enabled by the Internet, we can see the multitude of ways in which audience can become contributors. Martha Woodmansee (1994), professor of English and Law, examines the ways in which “the hypertext can be interactive; and when the reader begins actively to intervene in the text, adding to, subtracting from, and modifying is from his or her keyboard, the boundaries between author and reader disintegrate” (p. 26). She concludes, “by contributing his or her commentary, the reader becomes an overt collaborator” (Woodmansee, 1994, p. 26). It is in this spirit that we enter the discourse on collaborative authorship.

MIT has initiated a Co-Creation Studio out of their Open Documentary Lab to explore issues of collaborative authorship, collective wisdom and artificial intelligence. They have described co-creation as “an alternative to—and often a contestation of—a singular voice, authority, and/or process. Further, within digital infrastructures, the lines between audiences, subjects, and makers are blurred, and often erased” (Cizek & Uricchio, 2019, p. 4). Further, they have defined four major types of co-creation: in-person co-creation within communities, co-creation online and with emergent media, co-creation across disciplines, institutions, organizations, etc., and co-creation between humans and non-human systems.

More importantly, they have discovered some of the shared reasoning for co-creation including navigating changing technologies, confronting power systems, tackling complex

issues, and utilizing time differently. Perhaps most importantly, “co-creation is part of an ecosystem that can redefine concepts of the public good, civic trust, and the commons, including our public spaces, cities, platforms, and narratives” (Cizek & Uricchio, 2019, p. 9).

This dissertation examines the ways in which co-creation or collaborative authorship within a minority group using emergent media can confront power systems like heteronormativity and capitalist culture; and tackle complex issues of racism and representation. Audience-participants in the study preferred the terms of collaborator and contributor over co-author as they felt burdened by the legal associations with the later term. What we traditionally see as authors have created systems within their media texts that provide opportunities for audiences to contribute, control, and create—extending canon and authorship outwards. Including audience contributions into canon in a durable way, also often means eschewing traditional narrative methods and consistencies. The innate messiness of these models, whether transmedia storytelling, multiform characters, or long-durée memory embraces alternative modes of being that are core to the post-millennial queer sensibility.<sup>2</sup>

#### **1.4 Queer Production Culture**

John Caldwell (2008) defines production culture as entertainment industries self-reflection of their own working cultures, above and below the line. How do people working within media industries think of themselves, what they do and why? It is concerned with the “lived realities of people involved in media production as the subjects of theorizing culture” paying close attention to the rituals and routines of production (p. 4).

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<sup>2</sup> The longstanding cultural expectation of citation and lineage within both the fan and LGBTQ+ communities is essential for the equability of co-creation and collaborative authorship. (See chapter 6.)



Queer production culture builds from this understanding but expands the scope to include not only queer authorship, but also the networks of distribution, and the audience engagement with queerness and queer content. In the introduction to the special issue of the *Journal of Film and Video*, Alfred L. Martin, Jr. (2018) outlines the many aspects of queer production studies, which includes not only the creative process of mainstream commercial media but also the less often examined independent and alternative media productions. He also extends the focus of queer production culture to include paratexts, particularly their use in mitigating social and industrial anxieties around homosexuality or in creating preferred queer readings of texts. In short, “queer production studies is invested in the many facets of queer production *and* the production of queerness” (Martin, 2018, p. 5). Therefore, any contribution to a queer project is part of a queer production culture.<sup>3</sup>

Open TV or indie TV as defined by Aymar Jean Christian (2018) is one example of a queer production culture. Open TV is a production culture created by independent producers leveraging the connections available from the many-to-many distribution flows of networked technologies “to develop new and different ways of creating, supporting, and financing new stories” (Christian, 2018, p. 20). Indie TV as a queer production culture prioritizes creative ownership, diversity, and authenticity (Christian, 2014, p. 161). For Christian, “indie web producers are innovators taking risks in a creative market whose vast inequalities and new technologies encourage value creation outside of it. Lured by the chance to transform a powerful culture industry, indie producers frame their work as necessary for social change” (2018, p. 25).

Where Christian focuses entirely on the production culture of web series and indie television, this project includes various mediums under the same queer production culture. The

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<sup>3</sup> According to Bryan Wuest (2018) any media object that involves LGBTQ authorship, spectatorship or textual form/content (p. 25).

defining characteristic across these projects and mediums is audience co-creation or collaborative authorship as an essential part of the production culture. Though across different mediums most of these projects use social media as a structure for the collaboration process.<sup>4</sup> As such, these projects are part of social media entertainment, which is “intrinsically interactive audience-centricity and appeals to authenticity and community in a commercializing space” (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 149). When social media entertainment and queer production culture converge the “visibility practices [of the media text] represent varying degrees of political activism and media interventions, but also come with risks to their commercial viability” (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 202). Unlike Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, this project is not concerned with the commercial viability of these media projects, but is instead interested in the ways in which these projects negotiate capitalist culture to develop trust within a community.

## 1.5 Theoretical Bearings

While analyzing the data collected, I identified four types of “queer gestures” (Rodriguez, 2014) that were common to all of the case studies and most of the media texts identified by participants. By embracing excess through collaborative authorship, these gestures are queer in that they “highlight the everyday labor of political, social, and sexual energies that mark our collective will to survive this day, or to at least make the effort” (Rodriguez, 2014, p. 7-8). The first queer gesture is that of casual or unremarked self-representation of LGBTQ+ people within the text. The second is the use of a “remediation” (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) as queer aesthetic that takes antiquated medium-specific affordances and instead of making the text more accessible, renders it opaque and in need of interrogation. The third queer gesture is that of interactivity,

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<sup>4</sup> The exception being video games, which are innately interactive, and this use different modes for contribution.

specifically an interaction that allows audiences to create persistent and meaningful impact within the text. Finally, the last queer gesture is the use of alternative financing, particularly licensed fan-made merchandise and micropatronage. Each of these queer gestures allow audiences to contribute canonically and officially in the creation of the text in their own way. By doing so, these gestures use collaborative authorship or cocreation to push against capitalist culture as a normative oppressive structure—alongside heterosexuality, race, and gender.<sup>5</sup>

However, for these queer gestures to function together as a queer intertextual commodity they must form what Margot Weiss describes as a “queer circuit” (Weiss, 2011). A queer circuit examines the relationships within and between dialectical forces to examine how these forces work within cultural texts, social spaces, and capitalist structures, generally highlighting the dynamic between subject and power (Weiss, 2011, p. 7-8). The QIC relies on the connection between all four gestures to create a working circuit. The queer intertextual commodity works to integrate all forms of oppression, but centers capitalist culture by centering the commodity as both the desired object and the abject. Each gesture works in conjunction with the others in forming opportunities for collaborative authorship or cocreation as a form of disidentification with capitalist culture. To remove one gesture from the circuit would break the elements of cocreation apart, and it would no longer be a QIC.

The queer intertextual commodity is part of a larger ethos or sensibility based in trust, authenticity, collaboration, and community. Emerging as a digital extension of gay sensibility described by Jack Babuscio (1977) in “Camp and the Gay Sensibility,” the post-millennial queer sensibility uses digital affordances to foster a mode of interaction that centers around queerness via a defined creative aesthetic, affect, and identity. That is to say, this emerging sensibility relies

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<sup>5</sup> Similar to the connections Kara Keeling (2007) makes between “cinematic” representations of black lesbian butch/femme sociality and anticapitalist Black liberation movements in *Witch's Flight*.

on a shared look and feel created by and for queer people via new digital technologies like social media. Though the queer intertextual commodity is a type of object found within the post-millennial queer sensibility, it is not the only type of media found there.

Examining queer intertextual commodities, audiences and creators we can begin to see the post-millennial queer sensibility begin to take shape. Particularly, we can see two dialectics forming that interrogate the dynamics between trust and authenticity—collaboration and community. In its own way, each dialectic is centered on the intersections of identity, what it is to be “queer and—” in an ever-changing digital world. How then do we interact with one another? By what means? By whose limitations? Who has agency? What does that look like? Feel like? And how can we determine, for ourselves what it means to be part of and apart from mainstream culture and capital simultaneously?

## **1.6 A Perfect Mix of Methods**

This project uses a three-pronged approach, combining textual analysis, industry analysis, and audience reception practices. Each method provides its own set of tools and data outcomes that provide insight to different aspects of the objects, cultures, and people involved in the case studies. Ultimately, the variety of data collected helps create a fuller, more robust understanding of the negotiations and tactics implemented by authors—creatives and audiences alike. This study began in Summer of 2018 and data collection (survey, interviews, social media feeds) ended in November of 2019. However, examination of the case studies began years before, overall this project has been developing for five years, across multiple data sets and methods.

Textual analysis of the media objects in this study was the starting point for this project. I define media objects as not only the primary texts (web series, podcast, video game), but also secondary and even tertiary extensions like paratexts, transmedia texts, and social media

accounts (J. Gray, 2010; Jenkins, 2006, 2014). This includes examining the platforms the story is presented on, the limitations and advantages of each distribution site (YouTube, Tumblr, Twitter, Wattpad, VHX.TV, Amazon.com) and their relationship to each other and the audience. Textual mapping of these messy media objects is essential to understanding the ways in which audience and creators collaborate in the creation and navigation of the intertext, as well as the expanding “circles of authorship” (M. J. P. Wolf, 2012) that is central to this project.

Industry analysis allow us to examine the underlying financial structures, production cultures, and negotiations between creatives, audiences, and capitalist culture. I’ve examined the use of sponsorship deals, advertising, crowdfunding, micropatronage, and authorized fan-created ancillary merchandise to better understand how alternative media repurposes traditional industry methods for its own purposes. I utilize trade publications and financial documents when available in my analysis, but by far the most useful insights came from interviews with both production and audience creatives who worked on these projects in official capacities. I’ve been fortunate enough to interview five production creatives across my case studies, as well as an additional five audience creatives (audience members who were eventually paid or officially included into canonical world). These interviews helped to determine the extent of the financial collaboration between producer creatives and audience-participants/financial sponsors.

Finally, the third methodology used here is based within an audience reception approach, in which I used a “connective ethnography” (Hines, 2015) approach. I incorporated both online and traditional in-person ethnographic practices in a multi-sited study of audience-participants. Online locations for the project include the Twitter, Tumblr, and Wattpad communities for the case studies. In the role of participant-observer, I followed the titles, ship names (popular relationship pairings), and fandom monikers (text-specific shorthand for fans of a media text) for

each case study. Additionally, I followed all canonical character and official social media accounts for each case study. These feeds were pulled into NVivo to assist in coding and determining trends across case studies.

I've been fortunate enough to be able to include in-person observation of audiences and fans at four fan conventions in the last year and half as part of the ethnographic portion of this project. In May of 2018 I attended OutlantaCon (local) and GaylaxiCon (oldest U.S.) LGBTQ+ sci-fi fan conventions. Though neither of these conventions had panels or events specifically targeting the case study texts, the attendees are the target demographic for study participants, and I spent time observing and recruiting. In September of the same year, I attended DragonCon, which had several panels devoted to one of the case studies, *Welcome to Night Vale*, as well as sub-group of attendees DragonCon Queerios that are active and willing participants in the study. Additionally, I attended a live show of the "Spy in the Desert" (*WtNV*) for observation and recruitment in October. Finally, I attended ClexaCon in April of 2019. ClexaCon is one of the largest queer fan conventions in the country despite only being in its 3rd year and queer-women-centric.

At these field site visits, I took notes on audience behaviors and interactions, paying particular attention to audience-creative interactions, audience interactions with capitalist culture (sponsors, "selling-out," and commodification), and creatives discussing the production process. I recruited participants to complete an online survey by handing out postcards featuring popular ships from each of the case studies.



*Figure 1.1 Sample recruitment card design, including ships Alphyne, Cecilos, and Hollstein.*

The cards feature fan art I commissioned from fellow grad-student Colin Wheeler. The art is exclusive to the study and thus appealed to study participants on multiple levels. The anonymous survey asked audience members 18 and older questions about their demographic information, representation within the texts, fan behaviors, media interactions, and their understanding of authorship and ownership.

### **1.6.1 Preliminary Findings**

I received over one hundred responses to the survey. Participants range in age from 18-45 with the majority of respondents landing in the 26-35 range (40%) and 18-25-year-olds (29%) being the second largest group. Respondents hailed primarily from the United States, but interestingly also Mexico, Canada, Puerto Rico and Brazil. The case studies included in this dissertation each have international fandoms, so it is unsurprising to find fans from outside the U.S., but as the survey was in only English, it inherently limited potential participants.

Regarding gender expression, a little more than half of the respondents identified as female (56%). Given that one of the major recruitment sites was ClexaCon a female centric convention space this is expected. What is not expected is that gender non-conforming (gender queer, genderfluid, nonbinary, queer) accounted for eighteen percent (18%) of participants. If

one included those who identify as agender (7%) in this grouping nearly a quarter of respondents didn't subscribe to the binary gender system in some way.

Unsurprisingly, ninety percent of respondents identified as belong to the LGBTQ+ community in some way. With the most prevalent sexual identities disclosed as bisexual (18%), queer (17%), lesbian (14%), and asexual (13%). It is worth noting that more straight people (11%) and pansexual people (11%) contributed to the survey than gay men (8.5%).

Likewise, the data collected skews towards white perspectives as sixty-nine percent (69%) of the respondents identified as Caucasian, with Latinx/Hispanic (13%), African American/Black (3.6%), and those who identify as mixed race (3.6%) also participating. The whiteness of the respondents is important to consider when examining the case studies, which often feature people of color having to negotiate racial oppression within these queer fandom communities that are striving to be progressive in their rejection of heteronormativity, and negotiation of capitalist culture.

In addition to basic demographic information discussed above, the surveys had sections specific to media consumption, fandom experiences, levels of investment, and perceptions of authorship/ownership. Interestingly, respondents tended to use the terms author and owner in the reverse of the legal and financial definitions. Additionally, respondents felt more comfortable with the term contributor or collaborator over co-author or co-creator. These insights helped to define the structure of interviews that followed.

Finally, the reception study included twelve in-depth interviews with audience volunteers 18 and older. All interviews were done either over the phone or Skype, and participants remain anonymous unless they provided written permission to use their real name or professional pseudonym. In these interviews' fans discuss their general experiences within these fandoms,



interactions with canon via social media or fan-made merchandising, and issues of authorship as it relates to identity, media consumption, and representation. Interviews allow us to delve deeper into the ways audiences perceive their contributions towards these projects, why they participate, and how they see their negotiation of capitalist culture through these transmedia or intertextual commodities.

Over eighteen hours of interviews were transcribed and coded in NVivo. All data garnered from these three methodological prongs of inquiry including, financial structure analysis, textual analysis and intertextual world mapping, ethnographic observation notes, survey results, and interview transcripts were incorporated into the NVivo qualitative analysis software, where coding and connections developed. Some codes were determined prior to the start of analysis like collaboration, authorship, and interaction—whereas others developed more organically like trust, authenticity, and community.

## **1.7 A Quick Guide (Chapter Summaries)**

In this introduction chapter, I have provided a broad overview of the argument presented in this dissertation including foundational concepts, a brief sketch of the theory presented, methods used, and some initial findings. In particular, I have defined my understandings of the terms queer, collaborative authorship, and queer production culture, which are essential to the larger argument presented here, but are not discussed at length in future chapters. Additionally, this introduction provided the opportunity to address issues of race and intersectionality within the LGBTQ+ community, and the use of queer of color critique for theoretical intervention within these case studies. Finally, in this introduction I've presented the demographic breakdown of the survey participants of this study to highlight some biases that may be present in the forthcoming analysis (particularly in regard to race and gender).

The second chapter is the theoretical bones of this project. It is the detailed overview of the queer circuit, queer gestures, queer intertextual commodity, and the post-millennial queer sensibility. Using non-commercial objects as examples this chapter provides explanations of four queer gestures: unremarked self-representation, remediation as queer aesthetic, interactivity (object-bound interaction and intertextual play), and alternative financing (fan-made merchandising and micropatronage). Further, it explains the relationship these gestures have to collaborative authorship, the queer circuit, and ultimately the multiform and the post-millennial queer sensibility. The theory chapter uses non-commercial objects to highlight the ways in which the queer intertextual commodity negotiates capitalist culture within both gift economy as well as the capitalist economy presented in the case studies.

Chapters three and four present the first case study of the dissertation, a transmedia web series *Carmilla* (2014-2016). Created by Jordan Hall, Steph Oaknine and Ellen Simpson, the series is a loose adaption of gothic novella of the same name by Joseph Sheridan Le Fannu. *Carmilla* utilizes single-fixed camera video, social media feeds, podcasts, novels, and a film to tell its story—a story designed to turn the original insidious lesbian vampire trope on its head. Though each case study includes all four gestures within the queer circuit, the first *Carmilla* chapter focuses primarily on the gestures of self-representation, and intertextual play as interactivity. These two gestures are the two primary ways in which audiences contribute canonically towards the text, and where the text and reality often collapse. Additionally, it is in self-representation that we can interrogate racial diversity within the casting and audience response. The second *Carmilla* chapter focuses on alternative financing and remediation.

*Welcome to Night Vale* is our second case study and the focus of chapters five and six. *WtNV* is an ongoing podcast started in 2012 by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor. The podcast is

presented as a community radio station for a little town in the desert where all conspiracy theories are real, including programming elements like, advertisements, news, weather, and traffic reports. In this chapter we focus predominately on the queer gestures of alternative financing and remediation as queer aesthetic. In particular, we examine the changing forms of funding, the political devolution of the founders in regard to anti-capitalist/corporate culture. Despite the failed negotiations of capitalist culture, *WtNV* does succeed in representation diversity through casting practice, and more importantly the multiform character of Cecil Palmer.

In the final chapter presented here, we examine the ways in which the queer gestures, circuit, and intertextual commodity contribute towards a larger sensibility, aesthetic, and function. Exploring the ways in which the real and the imaginary collapse through audience contribution to create dynamic, if unstable, glimpses of queer utopia. This chapter pulls from a variety of media objects including the case studies, non-commercial projects, and the video game *Undertale* (2015) created by Toby Fox. It examines the potentiality of a queer space that is heterotopic, multiform, and interreal in nature (Booth, 2010; Downes, 2005; Murray, 1997).

## 2 QUEER GESTURES OF COCREATION

This chapter outlines the underlying theoretical structure of this project from the macro to the micro—from the cultural shift to individual objects, to elements within those projects. A set of Matryoshka dolls nesting inside each other. The largest doll is a queer sensibility tied to digital technologies and affordances that I term *post-millennial queer*. This sensibility or approach uses collaborative authorship and “disidentification” (Muñoz, 1999) to perform and create a “constellation” (Chisholm, 2005) or a loose collection of objects that share similar audiences, aesthetics, and politics, which are *queer “intertextual commodities”* (Marshall, 2002). In this foundation theory chapter, the objects used are non-commercial in nature, even avant-garde. They come from web series, podcasts, games, and webcomics. The primary case studies for the dissertation are either free or relatively inexpensive to access but are clearly within the commercial realm. Though these objects/experiences are across a variety of mediums, they are made similar by their shared attributes or “queer gestures” (Muñoz, 2009; Rodriguez, 2014). There are four key expressions or queer gestures that create the queer intertextual commodity: remediated aesthetic, interactivity, unremarked self-representation, and alternative financing that contribute towards the collapsed boundaries between the real and the imaginary, the audience and the creator, the commune and capital.

### 2.1 Post-Millennial Queer (Sensibility)

We must first understand the evolution of the term queer sensibility (earlier gay sensibility) and its association with camp (Babuscio, 1977; Harris, 1997; J. M. Wolf, 2013). Camp is a queer sensibility that has a long history of disruption, particularly in relation to gender and capitalism. Camp is a style with socio-political ties to the queer community. Popularized in

film and television in the 1970s, the aesthetic relies on exaggerated over the top performance and visuals, in order to invert high/lowbrow dynamics, and critique social norms through shock, humor, and excess (Mallan & McGillis, 2005, p. 13; Sontag, 1964). Camp is one of many queer sensibilities, there is also drag, the ball scene, the erotic, pride, space invasion (Puwar, 2004), queer melancholia (Cvetkovich, 2003) and queer utopianism/optimism (Muñoz, 2009), among many others. The post-millennial queer sensibility is a new addition to a long line of queer aesthetics, it is rooted in a reclamation of genres and storytelling modalities that are historically viewed as less desirable by mainstream audiences and industry alike—fan-created or inspired creative work.

Jack Babuscio (1977) defined gay sensibility as “a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of [the] social oppression [of homosexuality]” (19). Harris (1997) describes the gay sensibility as an innate mode of interacting with the world that allows gay people to identify, relate, and communicate with each other—a cultural performance that connects the queer community (36-37). For Wolf (2013) the function of a queer sensibility is that of “collective identity,” allowing those within the community “a weapon to combat legal and social injustices” (294). We can then understand a queer sensibility as an understanding or mode of interaction that centers around queerness via a defined creative aesthetic, affect, and identity. However, it is not divorced from race and racism which permeate our lived experience, as both queerness and racism are “project(s) of belonging” as defined by Sharon Holland (2012, 3). As such, it’s important to note that the vast majority of the projects discussed here are created by white queer people, who frequently fail at antiracist or even inclusionary praxis. Despite the failure of their creators, the collaborative nature of the post-

millennial queer sensibility mandates diversity and intersectionality through audience participation. However, to not acknowledge the privilege that creators have within the community and their own unconscious bias (and mine) would be disingenuous at best.

The post-millennial queer sensibility I am examining is founded in shared community, aesthetics and labor that I see as a continuation of cultural change in the intersectional LGBTQ+ community as it leverages new tactics of survival within the digital age. I have termed this sensibility or understanding "post-millennial queer" influenced by Louisa Stein's (2015) work *Millennial Fandom*, which examines the changing expectations of fans in the digital age of the transmedia television era. Her work focuses on the expectation, even demand for audience interaction with media creators and influence over media texts. Here instead of mainstream television and new media series, I examine LGBTQ+ "alternative" and "indie" new media projects created by and for queer people. The projects associated with the post-millennial queer sensibility have a similar affect or feeling — one based in queerness and collaboration.

Like its predecessors in camp and kitsch, post-millennial queer has "a tendency, indeed an insistence on, continually examining the contradictions that capital gives rise to on a daily basis" (Tinkcom, 2002, p. 5). In the modern context of media production commodification and consumer culture is unavoidable. Historically, "the visibility of sexual identity is often a matter of commodification" (Hennessy, 2000, p. 111). As such, it is vital to other this process, even as we capitulate to it, for otherwise the text, its' creators, and the audience have relinquished the power of visibility to industrial constructs. Thus, there is an integral need to other, to distance, to critique, to poke fun at the act of consumption, and capitalist structures through parody and satire as it intersects with gender, race, and sexuality.

## 2.2 Tactics of Survival: Collaborative Authorship as Disidentification

Post-Millennial Queer is a sensibility that has developed around interactive, collaborative, and transmedia content created by LGBTQ+ artists and audiences that feature queer characters as unremarkable (or un-remarked upon) but centered in the text.<sup>6</sup> This sensibility relies on tactics of survival, including "disidentification" (Muñoz, 1999) not only with heteronormative and racialized societal structures but also with capitalism as an underlying structure of oppression. One such disidentification is created by the sharing of authorship—prioritizing community over ownership in the creation of representation. José Esteban Muñoz (1999) conceptualized disidentification to describe a survival strategy practiced by minorities in order to negotiate a public sphere that punishes anyone who does not conform to the ghost of “normative citizenship.” This tactic recycles and reclaims stereotypes and tropes as powerful opportunities of “self-creation” (p. 4).

To disidentify is simultaneously to identify with and actively against a representation. Further, the act of disidentification is to "work on and against" dominant ideology instead of assimilating or rejecting that ideology (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11). Through this intervention, the negative or shameful ideology is not negated but exists alongside its reclaimed revision. Disidentification is "the desire for the once toxic representation. The phobic object, through a campy over the top performativity, is reconfigured as sexy and glamorous, and not the pathetic and abject spectacle it appears to be in the dominant eyes of heteronormative culture" (Muñoz 3).

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<sup>6</sup> Unremarked self-representation is one of the four queer gestures discussed in detail later on in this chapter. It is akin to “organic representation” (Christian & Costley White, 2020) or even “normalization,” though I hate to use the term, as it implies that queer becomes homonormative and that’s not what I’m describing here. Instead, I am trying to describe the “otherness” of queer is no longer a spectacle, but part of the tableau (but still queer/other/odd), just it blends in with all the other weird. Additionally, it’s a central, undeniable characteristic of the character, just not the main narrative for the character/audience.

It is both a process and an object, performance and reception, production, and spectacle. The self-creation cannot be separated from the catalyst or the reaction (Muñoz, 1999, p. 25).

Though Muñoz's work focused primarily on disidentification as a coping mechanism in response to sexuality, race, and gender as oppressive cultural forces, we can easily add late-stage capitalism as a state power of domination that disidentification can address (p. 5). The queer intertextual objects that are part of a post-millennial queer sensibility are rewriting the relationships between queerness and capitalism, ownership, and collaborative community through "disidentificatory desire" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 23).

By employing shared authorship as a central tactic of disidentification, I am re-framing capitalism through queer theory, blurring boundaries of inclusion, agency, and worth—looking at communal labor as both a gift and a commodity. Fundamentally, authorship works as "mediator of aesthetics and meaning, as an act of power and control, as industrial strategy, as something to be practiced something to be contested, and something to be won, awarded, denied, hoarded, and/or shared" (J. Gray & Johnson, 2013). By sharing authorship with audiences in small and large ways, queer intertextual commodities are sharing power and negotiating capitalism. Reclaiming aesthetics, stereotypical representations, and even capitalist structures through collaborative authorship as a tactic of disidentification, LGBTQ+ creatives and audiences "work on and against" their own exploitation and oppression.

Collaborative authorship as disidentification acknowledges through the queer gesture the oppressive force of "the normative," including gender, orientation, race, class, and particularly the capital structures of culture and ownership. Both content creators (traditional production) and audiences perform queer gestures as a means of touching, feeling, sharing, and ultimately co-creating a communal experience that others normativity, including capitalism. To be clear,



collaborative authorship as a structure of ownership and production has a long history from traditional media production that rejects "the auteur" to co-operative theater that eschews hierarchical structures for more fluid and organic organization. The projects presented here contribute to this classification but are also distinct in their variation, which focuses on creating community not only within formal production but also with audiences in the creation of the text. Thus, officially breaking down the barrier of authorship between creatives and audiences.

For example, the anthology web series *FANtasies* (2017) reclaims a much-maligned subgenre of fanfiction—real person slash fic. The defining characteristic of this genre is that the authors are not writing about the characters an actor portrays but instead focuses on the actors' real-life romances, and in doing so, fictionalizes them. This subgenre, in particular, is often pathologized both in and out of fandom because it appears that the authors and readers of these stories have a looser relationship with reality than most or are borderline obsessive. *FANtasies'* attempts to reclaim the genre is a disidentification based in collaborative authorship. Created by Drew Monson with Brevity and Wit Productions, and New Form, the series reaches out to fanfic authors and the people they write about, bringing all parties together to collaboratively create an episode that brings that fanfiction to the screen. The first episode of the series, "Paging Dr. Hart," brings series writer Lee Newton, fanfic author Shelby Anne Yarchin and her inspirations—comediennes, Hannah Hart and Grace Helbig, together to create a comedic fem-slash parody of *House, MD*. To use collaborative authorship as a form of disidentification is to use queer gestures to transgress boundaries and in doing so, to center community over ownership within a capitalist structure. Brevity and Wit Productions in their mission statement explains, "We believe in a collaborative process that pushes the limits creatively, aesthetically and beyond expectations." By bringing this group of people together in collaboration *FANtasies* transgresses

several established norms of propriety and authorship, but because of the collaborative nature of the production consent and citation remain central.

Jonas Löwgren and Bo Reimer view collaboration and authorship in relative and not absolute terms—as part of an ongoing process of design, consumption, and production that creates a text using a generally pre-existing infrastructure where multiple individuals contribute in the creation and recreation of the “text” (22-27). That is to say, that creatives use a specific infrastructure or platform with set limitations in their design, audiences/players/participants then consume by watching /playing/reading, and then produce additional content that feeds back into the design. This cycle of collaboration is ongoing as long as the infrastructure is available to the audience, long after the original creatives have stopped contributing to the cycle themselves. This “particular cultural form for collaborative, mediated practice” relies on action-oriented structures—both digital and analog networks (Löwgren and Reimer, 2013, p. 15) in which audiences are compelled to contribute in order to complete the text.

Ultimately, queering capitalism as a form of disidentification is about the disruption and reinforcement of capitalism as a structure through the sharing of authorship through collaboration. As Keith Aoki (1993) in his piece “Adrift in the Intertext” states,

The author is a powerful metaphor as well as metaphor for power (“author”-ize, “author”-ity, “auth”-entic, etc.)... and to transform the valence of that power, we must first understand how the figure of the author continues working to constrict what legal thought considers to be a threatening proliferation of meaning (p. 825).

It is with the communal sharing of authorship that these projects begin to queer capitalism and problematize the power dynamics of authority, copyright, and ownership. The term “queering capitalism” here means the act of rendering capitalism as “the other”— as antithetical to [queer] community. To disidentify with or to queer capitalism, one must prioritize authorship over ownership, collaboration as a process and community over product and productivity. Which is

not to say that you are removed from capitalism or have rejected it, in many cases far from it, instead you leverage capitalist tools like social media, crowdfunding, and other neo-liberal technologies to cocreate. The queer intertextual commodity and the communities around such collaborations accomplish this in a variety of ways.

### **2.3 Conceptualizing the Queer Intertextual Commodity**

Queer intertextual commodities (QIC) are objects or collaborations that require the audience to not only navigate between media texts but to complete them—ultimately creating canonical multiform or heteroglossia worlds and characters. Often these imaginary worlds collapse into the real world, affecting both. Queer intertextual commodities share four common elements or queer gestures: a remediated aesthetic that creates radical ambiguity, interaction that allows organic construction and/or creates radical memory, unremarked queer self-representation by characters and audience, and alternative financing which is reciprocal in nature through gift or citation (or both). Though many objects may include one or more of these gestures in their creation, a queer intertextual commodity must include all four gestures (though not necessarily equally).

David P. Marshall (2002) outlined the concept of the "intertextual commodity" in relation to children's programming, in which audiences "play" with the text through interlinking objects (main text, ads, toys, making-of videos, trailers, websites) and "immerse" themselves in the world-building, often integrating play into their daily lives (p. 79). In Marshall's intertextual commodity, the audience is ensnared in an "elaborate extratextual matrix... designed to encircle, entice, and deepen the significance of the film for the audience" (p. 7). Marshall's concept of the "intertextual commodity" is a more appropriate base for new media queering capitalism, as opposed to Michael Curtin's (2009) matrix media because Curtin's concept is that there is still a

central commodity in an ideal state that the audience is re-building (p. 13). Though this does create multiple paths for the audience to interact with the media object, for Curtin, the commodity being sold is the ideal state. Whereas for Marshall's intertextual commodity, it is the imaginative interaction that is being "sold." For the queer intertextual commodity, it is not only the interaction but the ability to contribute or collaborate in the authorship of the text that is being capitalized. In addition to play and immersion, the queer intertextual commodity must add a sense of agency in contributing towards communal work; such that the audience contributes towards its own visibility through the text. The queer intertextual commodity cannot be "played" alone, it is a collaborative venture in which audience-participants must be able to interact with and contribute towards the canonical world in some way.

The intertextual commodity is flexible and allows for canonical and non-canonical content to be included within the interlinking text while viewing the entire experience as one commodity within the culture. Thus, making the intertextual commodity a more appropriate conceptual base than transmedia. Henry Jenkins (2006) defines transmedia storytelling as a story told across multiple mediums with temporal consistency and generally with unified authorship. Elizabeth Evans (2011) expands this by adding conceptualizations of transmedia distribution (disseminating content on one more than one medium or outlet simultaneously) and transmedia engagement (watching media on a variety of devices). While Suzanne Scott (2010) problematizes transmedia storytelling as an attempt to close narrative gaps with additional content, and therefore limit the opportunities for fans to expand the world themselves, citing major media franchises like *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter* (p. 31). Transmedia projects assume audience interaction by following narrative storylines across mediums, platforms, and devices,

but do not encourage audiences to remix through linkage play or contribute towards the world-building through their participation.

It is important to note here that both Marshall's description of the "intertextual commodity" and my own queer version are centering the "commodity." For Marshall, this is to center this space as sold experience through the sale of the toy. For the queer intertextual commodity, there is no physical product sold to the consumer to allow them to "play" in the transmedia space—most of these objects are free to the audience and are often ad or sponsor-free. It is, however, a reminder that all of these objects even as they try to subvert the commercial structures through a variety of tactics remain embroiled in the broader capitalist system; they are still being "sold" in some way and are often a primary source of income needed for survival.

The queer intertextual commodity is grounded in a culture and understanding of the audience that is based in Stuart Hall's encode/decode, John Fiske's active audience, and Henry Jenkins' participatory culture. Participatory culture is a reception environment that creates a space for audiences to interact, form community, create, mentor, critique, and show appreciation for a media text and community contributions (Jenkins, 2006). Conceptualized before social media, participatory culture has always relied on participants (fans) networking at conventions, and distributing fan works through informal networks. However, with the pervasiveness of social media apps and mobile devices, it is useful to consider the audience as not only participants but as networked. danah boyd (2010) looks at the social media network like Twitter as a "networked public" that combines personal social connections and a broader public audience in which the speaker is also audience (p. 129). The networked public or counter-public is continuously in the

moment of a many-to-many network that is limited only by platform restraints, the evolution of convergence culture.

Audience participation is not limited to fandom communities or even grassroots promotion and marketing for media texts, though they also provide that labor. Audiences are often becoming financial backers of their favorite media productions. Indie media production has a long history of alternative financing, long before crowdfunding was a concept. Queer production culture often relies on audience funding through direct patronage as a form of interaction, alongside informal and formal marketing and promotions. In many instances, it also relies on audience participation in the creation of the text. By relying on audience interaction, immersion, and play, content creators are relying on audience participation to contribute to the canonical world of the text, to be collaborators and coauthors.

#### **2.4 The Four Queer Gestures of the QIC**

The queer gesture is one that is playful, excessive, and a refusal to “normalize” expressed in the margins by the marginalized. Queerness through gesture is about the social and the sexual; that is to say, it is about forming community and a feeling of connectedness while embracing the "abject" through pleasure. The queer gesture used in the queer intertextual commodity is performed knowingly and subconsciously by creators and audiences while creating community, pleasure, and resistance to capitalist structures while simultaneously existing within those structures.

The concept of “queer gesture” was explored in-depth by Juana Maria Rodriguez (2014), and it is from her understanding that we derive the conceptualization used here. In her book *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* she postulates,

a theory of queer gesture that works in the interstices between sexual desires and political demands, between discipline and fantasy, between utopian longing and everyday failures.

Queer gestures are those that highlight the everyday labor of political, social, and sexual energies that mark our collective will to survive this day, or to at least make the effort (p. 7-8).

From this understanding, we can see connections to Michel de Certeau's (1984) "la perruque" or "making do for oneself" as a tactic of survival—both literal and cultural. For de Certeau, a "tactic" is any coping mechanism used in everyday life in which we use our own agency to dissent or resist assimilation into homogenized capitalist culture. For Rodriguez, the "queer gesture" is a form of refusal that does not acknowledge the expectation of propriety (racialized hetero- or homo- normative expectations). It is a refusal to be "toned down," and instead leans into the perceived "excess" of sexuality and race by embracing the confrontation of the abject as pleasurable, framing that which is considered abject in such a way that we confront the absurdity through play.

Building upon this foundation of the queer gesture, this project centers capitalist culture as an oppressive force alongside racial and sexual normative expectations. Capitalism is as brutal as white supremacy and overt homophobia, and as insidious as the "default to whiteness" and heteronormative expectations found in media and society. It is to be reviled, and yet it is pleasurable, and it is this juxtaposition that the queer gesture plays with through exaggeration, excess, and parody. By centering capitalism as an underlying structure of oppression that cannot be escaped any more than the constructs of race, gender or sexuality this project acknowledges like Roopali and Banet-Weiser (2012) before me that "one can no longer—if one ever could—stand outside the system to critique it" (p. 3-4). Queer gestures are moments of collaboration between creatives and audiences where the paradox of commodity activism, of resistance against the system while benefitting from the system, is laid bare. This collection of queer gestures renders the edges of the queer intertextual commodities (media objects and experiences).

Collaborative authorship or shared authorship create a queerness through gesture that forms community and a feeling of connectedness while embracing the “abject” of capitalism through the pleasure of play. Playing with the excess of capitalism is a refusal to capitulate entirely to the system by embracing and sharing authorship as cultural ownership and even financial and legal ownership. Queer gestures of collaborative authorship are a disidentification with capitalism that creates queer intertextual commodities. The queer intertextual commodity structure is multifaceted with four core elements or queer gestures: a remediated aesthetic, interactivity, unremarked self-representation, and alternative financing creating a “queer circuit” that defines the boundaries of the QIC and its politics (Weiss, 2011. p. 3-4).

The QIC is bounded by multiple queer gestures that form a queer circuit that examines the relationships within and between dialectical forces to examine how these forces work within cultural texts, social spaces, and capitalism, generally highlighting the dynamic between subject and power (Weiss, 2011, p. 7-8). The circuit that surrounds the QIC is specifically looking at the dialectical tensions between unremarked representations/centered characters, queered consumerism/capitalist infrastructure, satirical camp/remediation, and imaginary world-building/real but virtual worlds. Each dialectic connects to the other, creating wider frameworks of queer identity, politic, aesthetic, and gesture, creating a material space of performativity from which subjects participate and collaborate creating queer possibilities.

#### ***2.4.1 First Gesture: Remediation as Queer Aesthetic***

Remediation is a queer aesthetic that creates an ambiguity that is radical in allowing the audience to create a multiform, thus expanding canonicity to fanon and opening the door to fans as coauthors. As a queer gesture, remediation provides an aesthetic gap, a lack for the audience to fill. This canonical gap is left vague because it is both universal and individual, and often



linked to trauma. As explained by Juana Maria Rodriguez (2014), “Sometimes the point of a gesture is that it can register what cannot or should not be expressed in words. And sometimes it signals what one wishes to keep out of sound’s reach” (p. 4). With this in mind, I approach remediation as a queer aesthetic that creates a gesture of queerness grounded in radical ambiguity and the multiform.

Remediation is where new media incorporates visual markers of previous mediums into its aesthetic. Remediation is defined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999), as a binary logic of immediacy and hypermediacy, which refers to the instant access and understanding of new media, and the nesting dolls of media aesthetics (22, 30). As an aesthetic theory, remediation has three core concepts (1) the mediation of mediation, (2) the inseparability of mediation and reality, and (3) the reform of media (p. 55-62). In other words, remediation is the intertextual process of using older media aesthetics to make new media aesthetics or technology “make sense” to the viewer-user. Further, mediations are not simulations, but real artifacts that are in many ways indistinguishable from the “real” and thus function as objects in the world. Finally, remediation is the repurposing and rehabilitation of antiquated media into new or digital forms with the expectation of improving on the predecessor.

Remediation as an aesthetic pulls older, more familiar media and their aesthetic elements into newer mediums and technologies, generally to provide a familiar base for audiences to relate to the new interface or medium. However, remediation in queer intertextual commodities does not make new media familiar, comforting, or understandable to audiences/users. Instead, remediation as a queer gesture renders old formats, cues, and aesthetics as strange, otherworldly, and in need of interrogation. In "othering," the familiar, remediation as a queer gesture creates

radical ambiguity that requires the audience to question, create, and interact—often manipulating the text in some way.

The video game *Curtain* created by dreamfeel in 2014 remediates older 8-bit video games by focusing on the hypermediacy of the pixelated images. It is part of what Anna Anthropy would term a “videogame zine,” a subset of serious games that focus on empathy and emotional exploration through game mechanics from a variety of positionalities (Anthropy, 2012).<sup>7</sup> The use of 8-bit art is seeing a resurgence since its first use with the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in 1983, despite easy access to more realistic and sophisticated rendering technology. The use of pixel art in games is commonly considered an homage to the NES era, banking both literally and figuratively on nostalgia. The use of pixel art in a contemporary game is a remediation of an older aesthetic and technology. Yet, many game creators like Jason Rohrer (*Passage* and *Gravitation*) and Nathan Vella (*Super Time Force* & *Superbrothers*) view pixel art as a “native” aesthetic to video games—pixels being the visual equivalent of code (Byford, 2014). *Curtain* goes beyond just the use of pixel art in its aesthetic, by using an unnatural color palette, and constant movement through shifting light, purposeful static or pixel flicker, and of course the player’s own movement throughout the space.



**Figure 2.1** Screenshot from *Curtain* with the distorted pixel aesthetic.

<sup>7</sup> *Curtain* and other videogames that belong to the QIC like *Undertale*, *Gone Home*, and *Consenticle*, are also part of woke gaming, serious games, and queer game studies (Anthropy, 2012; K. L. Gray & Leonard, 2018; Ruberg, 2019; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017; Shaw & Friesem, 2016).

The extreme colors and image shifting creates a disorienting space for both character and player. The use of remediation as a queer gesture in *Curtain* allows the player to experience an abusive relationship as the lesbian player-character of Ally and with her abusive partner, Kaci, an unseen non-player character. The LGBTQ+ community has historically avoided openly discussing any negative aspect of the community in fear of demonization, and as such abuse is under-reported in the LGBTQ+ community. Thus, the remediation problematizes the nostalgic aesthetic by making its use ambiguous, effectively "queering" the form by creating radical ambiguity.

According to Max Black (1979), ambiguity can become radical in nature when an expert or the ideal reader can locate two or more meanings that conflict with one another in at least one feature of the text (p. 94-95). When understanding radical ambiguity as part of a queer gesture generally associated with a remediated aesthetic, this definition becomes more specific. Radical ambiguity is purposefully created through the use of remediation as an aesthetic with the intent to allow the audience to participate in the creation of the text (canon). These contributions to or understandings of canon are in conflict with one another, and yet all are considered officially part of the text.

These gestures ultimately create a multiform or heteroglasic universe in which the queer intertextual commodity resides; that is to say that the queer gesture through remediation, camp, but most importantly interaction opens a gap for canonical multiplicity—allowing for an infinite combination of intersectional identities to become canonical. A multiform story as defined by Janet Murray (1997) is a “dramatic narrative that presents a single situation or plotline in multiple versions, versions that would be mutually exclusive in our ordinary experience” (p. 30).

The queer intertextual commodity by opening up canon to audience interaction and contributions also opens up opportunities for communal construction, and this construction by the very nature of a collective will not cohere but meander. In the best of cases, these multiforms become “heteroglossia,” worlds that purposefully and radically fall apart, and in doing so productively destabilizes political unity or centrality of thought (Hassler-Forest, 2016, p. 175). In the case of queer intertextual commodities, the radical disintegration collapses the boundary distinctions between the material “real” world and the virtual “imaginary” story world.

#### ***2.4.2 Second Gesture: Interaction, Performativity, and Queer Kinship***

Interactivity as a queer gesture allows the audience to contribute to the text in some meaningful way, whether that is virtually or via imagination. There is a performativity to interaction, even if that performance is only for oneself. That interaction or performance is a queer gesture that connects you the viewer/user/player to the queer intertextual commodity as a kind of queer kinship with the object and the community that has created it. There are two types of interactivity present in the queer intertextual commodity, and both are queer gestures: object bound interaction and intertextual play interaction.

Interactivity is defined by Henry Jenkins (2006) as technology becoming more responsive to audience input, generally within a platform's protocol limitations (video game, social media platform, website, etc.). This understanding of interactivity is based on the ludic or rule-based interaction associated with games. However, David P. Marshall (2002) opens the conceptualization of interactivity to incorporate a broader set of audience participation that does not rely on technology or even narrative interactions (a la transmedia) but interactivity between

cultural forms through the audience's active creation of intertextual, and cultural linkages (p. 80).<sup>8</sup> Regardless, this interactivity is a form of play that pleases the audience-participants.

The first type of interaction is enclosed within the bounds of the object—it is a gesture performed between the player/user/viewer and the queer intertextual commodity. The most common examples of bounded interaction are found in game-based objects where the interaction is inherent to the medium. Object bound interaction is not unique to the queer intertextual commodity. However, base this mechanic of interaction in a queer sensibility it becomes a queer gesture. Two common queer mechanics of object bound interaction discussed here are consent-based game mechanics and radical memory.<sup>9</sup>

Consent-based game mechanics are queer gestures that despite being object bound are fundamental to our understanding of agency and queer kinship. An example of this is the game designed by the queer collective Buried Without Ceremony, entitled *a Place to Fuck Each Other*. As the title suggests, two players assume character roles who are looking not only for a location but an environment that is conducive for sex. The third player is the location providing details of the environment. Each character in the pair must continually provide consent as the location/environment is narrowed down to what is hopefully the ideal for that couple. If at any time one of the characters expresses unease or wanting to leave the scenario, consent is revoked, and the round is over. Players switch roles, and new characters can be created, or be continued with a different player. This role-playing game is designed explicitly around creating and maintaining sexual consent. Though the game is left open to any gender or orientation configuration, it was initially designed specifically with two lesbians in mind (the original title

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<sup>8</sup> I would argue that interactivity can also be through fiscal and other economic means, as seen in the third gesture of alternative financing.

<sup>9</sup> Radical memory as queer gesture will be discussed in-depth with *Undertale* in the conclusion of this project.

was *Two Dykes Looking to Fuck*), but after the community around *Buried Without Ceremony* expressed a desire for more inclusive language, the game was modified to its present state.

What is critical here is that the interactivity despite being bound to a specific object, in this case, a game, allows the player to express a meaningful and persistent change (characters and their traits are never destroyed). Further, the performance created through the game provides players with "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Murray, 1997, p. 126) to explore their own queerness and kink as a queer gesture. Though *A Place to...* a game designed around sexual consent as a queer game mechanic/interaction, there are other types of consent-based mechanics that are queer gestures including the gesture of coming out, which can be seen in the *Coming Out Simulator* by Nicky Case and the web series *FANTASIES* which explore consent through real person fanfiction with both fan fiction authors and the real people they write about.

Consent is essential in the creation of queer kinship, and when interactivity is used as a queer gesture the consent created within the bounds of the object, transgresses those bounds to include real-world queer kinship beyond the characters of origins to the players/participants. Audience interactions as queer gestures and contributions to imaginary and often participatory worlds can be seen as various individual and communal "tactics of survival," whether interaction, immersion, or critical play, these tactics provide a sense of agency that contributes towards" a virtual community of "queer kinship" (Rodríguez, 2014, p. 49). Juana Maria Rodríguez defines queer kinship as not only a social structure but as a family structure:

Thinking about what a theory of queer gesture might offer to an understanding of kinship entails being attuned to the emotional and political consequences of the complex bonds we seek to create... with different forms of familial relations. These gestures of recognition require that we expand our definitions affiliation, if not family (p. 49).

Queer kinship, the communities of people and support that we create, regardless of the framework (physical, virtual, a hybrid of both) fan-ish, or not are part of an established tactic of survival essential to queer identity. The queer intertextual commodity provides an opportunity to create and the infrastructure to support fledgling queer kinship in a safe (bounded) counter-public.

Queer kinship through interactivity as a queer gesture expands beyond the participants of any one bounded object in this second and more common type of interactivity—that of intertextual play. The vast majority of queer intertextual commodities are transmedial in nature (even if there is a primary text or “mothership” present). As transmedia objects, they rely on "radical intertextuality and multimodality" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 245), where creators rely on the audience to stitch together the story and world through playful interactions across media texts and mediums. However, a distinction to be made between traditional transmedia texts and the QIC is the official inclusion of fanworks (in part or as a whole) as part of the extended canon of the commodity. This is a merger of official transmedia content, and the experiences of audiences interacting across modalities and the "fan-produced transmedia texts," which are loosely interconnected fantexts that create soft transmedia narratives that expand the fictional world in which they are based or create entirely new adjacent worlds (Stein, 2017, p. 71-72). Intertextual play as a queer gesture connects the audience, creators, and the object into a loose kinship that is queer through collaborative authorship and heteroglossia.

Queer intertextual commodities are inherently imaginary worlds that “are inhabited through the ironic imagination” that is audiences must “exercise a ‘double consciousness’ [able] to embrace complementaries, to be capable of living simultaneously in multiple worlds without experiencing cognitive dissonance” (Saler, 2012, p. 13). The QIC prompts the audience to create

the interstitial space and characterizations through its social media presence. The play between texts and modality is assumed by the creator and officially incorporates the “intertextual fantext” into the larger canonical world. However, the medium(s) affordances constrain the limitations of intertextual play. As Mark J. P. Wolf (2012) states, “The relationship between interactivity and immersion in a world depends greatly on the medium, the medium’s conventions, and the audience’s expectations of the medium” (p. 221).

*The Magnus Archive* created by Jonathan Sims at the London-based Rusty Quill company is an example. The podcast is a supernatural anthology series that follows Jonathan Sims (voices himself), as he and his team at the Magnus Institute convert the archive to audio and supplement the statements with follow-up research. As a podcast, the medium relies more heavily on audience interactivity and imagination to bring the text to life; creatives rely on the audience's ability to not only live in multiple worlds simultaneously but to render those worlds in vivid detail.<sup>10</sup> *The Magnus Archives* provides gated interactivity through forums on its site, as well as linking out to fan spaces on its home page. It creates direct access to its subreddit and to the fandom wiki which officially creates a connection between the official "motherhip" of the podcast to the fan works, including these texts into the larger queer intertextual commodity. The fandom wiki has created a timeline of the archives derived and extrapolated from episodes or cases that starts in 391 A.D. and continues to 2018. The timeline marks contradictions, facts explicitly stated in case files, and those speculated from context. Fans have also created "case files" to accompany the audio record of the case file, including case summaries, icons, case images, post-statement follow-ups, and links to the episode audio and transcripts. Whereas, the

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<sup>10</sup> Full recognition that podcasts are among a long list of single-sense mediums with this advantage/limitation and that radio dramas heavily relied on this tactic. Please see the remediation section of this chapter or the *Welcome to Night Vale* case study for additional discussion of the historicity or medium specificity.



subreddit is predominately devoted to creating suggestions for new case files from both real and fictional events and images for the archive. By linking out to fan spaces from the central site, the creators have, in a small way, incorporated these playful interactions and additions into the world-building.

Interactivity as a queer gesture in general and intertextual play, in particular, relies on the audience finding pleasure in agency, through making connections, creating persistent and often meaningful changes to the imaginary world that cultivates a sense of authorship. Audience interactions are often playful in the sense of Judith Butler's (1990) "making gender trouble" or subversive gender performativity associated with drag, gender-bending, and androgyny can also be expanded to playful manipulations of capitalism and social hierarchies (p. 171). Alternatively, Muñoz's queer gesture where one relishes in the "pleasures of queerness, the joys of gender dissonance, of willfully making one's way against the stream of a crushing heteronormative tide" (2009, p. 74). The playful nature in which audiences interact with the queer intertextual object (and each other) disrupts normative power structures, whether culturally (narrative or world-building), socially (gender, class, race representations), or economically (capital and ownership). That this play is encouraged and essential to the pleasure of the program for audiences is a marker of the queer intertextual commodity. Ultimately interactivity, whether framed as technological, cultural, economic, or queer is audiences participating in "critical play." Mary Flanagan (2009) explains, "Critical play means to create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life" (p. 6). For the queer intertextual commodity, these questions revolve around what it means to be queer in a capitalist environment.

### 2.4.3 *Third Gesture: Unremarked Self-Representation*

Self-representation in independent minority media has a long history across a variety of texts including plays, novels, movies, comics, video games, and even television, either as public access or web television. At the core of alternative media is the desire to be seen, to be recognized—to be out of the metaphysical closet, or as Fuss (1991) states “out is really to be in—inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible” (p. 4). To have self-representation is to have authenticity, diversity, and authority in the media we consume. As a queer gesture, self-representation in the text must be visible, centered, and *unremarked upon by the text itself*. That is to say that the media text never overtly addresses that which would render the character historically to be considered "queer" as an issue within the social confines of the world-building.

Unremarkable or unremarked upon queer representation is akin to Christian and Costley White’s (2020) concept of “organic representation” in that “those who have been historically marginalized not only appear in their stories but also own and fine-tune narratives, marketing, and distribution” (136). A complicating factor of unremarked queerness is that it often elides race and racism. In an ideal world, intersectional representation would be the default within any queer text, however, we do not live in a utopian world that is in the magical “beyond” of post-racism. Instead, we live in a world of “quotidian racism [that] can seem rather unremarkable” and which is embedded in every aspect of life (Holland, 2012, 5). Therefore, unremarkable queerness cannot be colorblind in its creative team or casting or it has failed to fully embrace self-representation. In both of the major case studies presented here, audiences have corrected production in regard to racist casting practices, and creatives have chastised audiences for

bullying behaviors.<sup>11</sup> Self-representation and unremarked queerness inherently rely on the creative-audience bond to provide rich, meaningful, and contextualized “organic” representation that is reciprocal and centered.

To be clear this is not normalization or homonormativity (though it can contribute towards both of these things), but the integration of queerness as part of the larger tableau of human weirdness in the world, where orientation, gender nonconformity, and kink are no more or less odd than monogamy—white picket fences, and vanilla sex to the viewer. The narrative must present variation respectfully, using inclusive language, preferred pronouns, and terminology. Traditionally self-representation in independent (or mainstream) media has relied on the creative team (producers, writers, directors, and actors) being of the minority community presented in the media text. This is also true in the queer intertextual commodity, but it is not the only aspect of self-representation included as a queer gesture. In queer intertextual commodities, audiences also create a self-representation performance as part of their own identity formation, usually through some form of interactivity with the text and each other.

According to Mary Gray (2009) the construction of queer youth identity is a “labor carried out among and through people, places, media texts, and a host of other circuitous routes,”—it is “the collective labor of crafting, articulating, and pushing the boundaries of identities” (p. 21). Judith Butler (1993) in her work *Bodies that Matter* describes the process of identity formation as citation (p. 225). We are continually constructing our identity based on the codes in our environment and as Cover (2015) argues there is a push-pull dichotomy that

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<sup>11</sup> Fans of *Carmilla* demanded a more diverse cast in season 2 of the series and the success of the show allowed not only for additional casting, but for one of the queer characters of color, Melanippe Callis (Nicole Stamp), to have an additional paraquel podcast in the final season. Similarly, *Welcome to Night Vale* has made a specific point to cast voice actors with similar cultural backgrounds to the characters they are portraying as the actors have a lot of control over their performance (there are no directorial notes from the writers with the scripts). *WtNV* creators have had to intervene in fan faction feuding over the character of Cecil.

continues as we try to simultaneously perform coherence from a pastiche of "identity codes that are flashed before us on screens, clothing, billboards, and in the sheer multiplicity of identity" (p. 50). Historically, the media representations visible to LGBTQ+ youth and from which they must cite are mainstream, often stereotypical, and even harmful. Therefore, self-representation in media is essential to personal identity formation, but also in the creation of popular knowledge or "dominant memory" within both subcultures and more mainstream society (Spigel, 2001, p. 364). In essence, the normalization of representation requires minority characters to be treated by the story world, and the camera as if they were the dominant culture in mainstream society, and therefore nothing "special" or at least not special due to their orientation, gender presentation, or sexual preferences.

Queer youth "use new media to enhance their sense of inclusion to broader, imagined queer communities beyond their hometowns. They also experience new media as one among several ephemeral moments of public space and belonging. They effectively—though not without cost—suture the queer social worlds they find in their hometowns, television and online" (Gray, 2009, p. 15). The participatory nature of new media texts allows for collaborative or communal identity labor described by Gray and others. However, queer intertextual commodities through the queer gesture of self-representation extend this self-authorship from the singular bounds of either the diegetic or non-diegetic worlds by blending the two. Incorporating, audience members' real-life experiences, fictionalized characterizations of themselves, primary text events, and even sponsorship brands into the canonical world of the queer intertextual commodity. By incorporating fan interactions with the text, and its characters as part of the official world-building, QIC collapses the social separations between "IRL" (in real life) and imaginary worlds, thus queering the world-building.

Accidental assimilation is the first type of self-representational performance as queer gesture. This is when audience members interact with the characters or world as themselves, not as imaginary characters within the world, and the world reacts as if the audience member is part of the world. Whereby, audience members are "accidentally" pulled into the story context, and their online identity is incorporated into the story world. The vast majority of these interactions read as audience members' being curious about a particular element of backstory, generally using interactivity as a method of engagement with the world that then alters it. These interactions expand the world-building of the QIC; regardless of whether or not that was the audience member's intention.

The Norwegian transmedia web series, *SKAM* (2015-2017) has been adapted as a format across Europe and recently in the US (seven and counting). Each series, *SKAM* follows the story of one of the central characters as they explore the title central concept "shame." However, unlike more mainstream (internet) television, the central text is not the standard "episodes," but the social media feeds of the series characters. Snippets of video from 15 seconds to 5 or 6 minutes are posted throughout the week in "real-time" for the characters, with an edited compilation "episode" wrapping up the week. However, as the primary text for *SKAM* uses social media platforms, they are also beholden to those platforms' affordances and limitations, including commentary. It is through the commentary that audiences inadvertently insert themselves into the world of *SKAM*. As character accounts reply to comments on the story and become assimilated into the show.

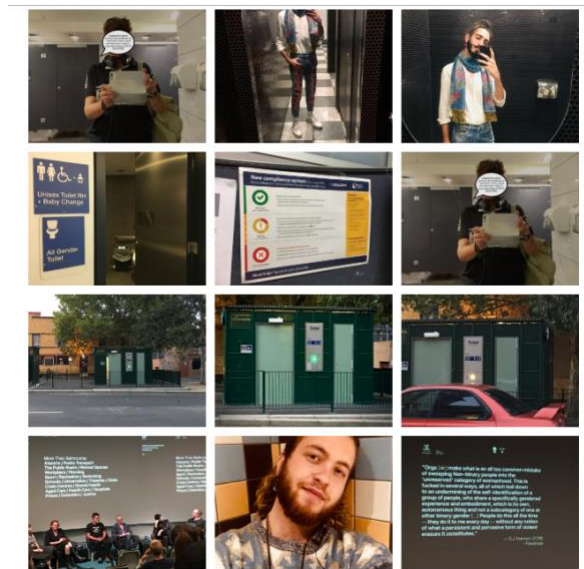
Alternatively, purposeful insertion is a self-representational performance where the audience member intends, through their interaction, to be included in the imaginary world. They have fully accepted the invitation to participate. As audience members, they are highly invested

in the world, taking on aspects of the imaginary through their engagement. Their interaction requires the story world's response in some way. In these cases, audience members can either choose to perform as themselves, incorporating their identity into the world, or create a character and therefore trying out an identity for their self-representational performance. These audience members have fully engaged with the text and have positioned themselves as part of the world, either as themselves or as an avatar character. Regardless, the audience's self-representation is a remediation of the self within and contributing to the world-building of the QIC.

*Rainbow Family Tree* is a queer digital curation site that ran for 2-years centered in Australia and while not a single story or world it is an example of a QIC that uses purposeful insertion of self-representation as a queer gesture. However, instead of audience/authors contributing to a world, they are contributing to a thematic project. There are almost two-hundred contributors to the site, spread across seven projects with dozens of images, over fifty video contributions, and a half dozen individual blogs. Here audiences could not only view and comment but contribute their own artwork and stories to the project's central theme. Therefore, contributing to the intertextual play for themselves and others.



*Figure 2.2 Rainbow Family Tree Video Project.*



**Figure 2.3** Safe2Selfie

A particularly popular group was *BeyondGender*, which includes works created in the online workshop, as well as commentary and outside submissions on transgender rights. This group eventually split off to create the *safe2selfie* interactive map. This project allows participants to upload a geotagged selfie in a space they feel safe with an accompanying audio piece. Similar to the Refuge Restrooms, this project focuses on sharing safe spaces for trans

people; additionally, it examines their relationships with their own image in relation to the space they inhabit.

Through these interactions, the audience is participating in the worldbuilding of these texts. Mark J. P. Wolf (2012) in *Building Imaginary Worlds*, explains authorship as a concentric circle that expands authorship outwards (p. 270-271). Interactive and participatory worlds extend authorship to the audience. The “acts of authorship by players in participatory worlds can range from changes made diegetically from within a world to those made from without” (Wolf, 2012, p. 281). That is to say, the audience can contribute towards the worldbuilding as remediations of themselves or by influencing production. In the case of QIC and self-representation as a queer gesture, the world's initial creators consider canonical any interaction between characters and the audience, and therefore, the audience becomes a secondary co-creator. Secondary, due to the limitations in the audience's ability to expand and build in these worlds canonically (Wolf, 2012, p. 143). However, the limitations in co-creating do not negate the queer gesture of audience self-inclusion, the gift of the remediated self, expanding queer representation on screen.

#### ***2.4.4 Fourth Gesture: Alternative Financing***

In addition to contributing to the creation of these participatory worlds through self-representation, audiences also share in the creation of the text by influencing production through more traditional economic means. The final queer gesture is that of alternative financing as communal support through micropatronage and fan merchandising and licensing. The former is a gesture of solidarity, support, and appreciation-firmly established in the gift economy. The latter is an alteration of traditional commercial licensing that includes fan works as official or sanctioned merchandisers. Both types of alternative financing rely on community and shared authorship.



The queer intertextual commodity is part of a "hybrid economy" as defined by Lawrence Lessig (2008) that merges commercial interests and sharing or gifting economy practices. Hybrid economies provide textual experiences that create communal, collaborative digital spaces that contribute towards a commodity. However, Lessig (and I) would argue that this is not exploitation, as long as the venture is ethical. That is to say, the ethical hybrid economy: (1) respects the community; (2) gives the community responsibility and authority; and (3) the community's work matters. Further, the "hybrid that respects the rights of the creator—both the original creator and the remixer—is more likely to survive than one that doesn't" (Lessig, 2008, p. 247). Ethical ventures in the hybrid economy are truly based on a single key concept common to copyright law, fandom, and queer culture—citation.

A moment of clarity, crowdfunding or “fan-ancing” as described by Suzanne Scott (2014) is “the direct, monetary contribution by fans to support the production of a text that would otherwise remain unproduced within the media industries” (p. 170). Crowdfunding is a specific fund-raising drive for a concrete project that generally has a predictable outcome in which the patron/sponsor will have access, whereas “micropatronage” (Scolari & Roig Telo, 2015) is a donation either once or ongoing to an individual artist or collective in support of their endeavors in which you may or may not have access to their future work. The distinction between these two terms is essential when placed into the context of the hybrid economy, neoliberal capitalism, and audience reception studies.

It is essential to explore the historical, political, and industrial ramifications of relying on audiences as sponsors/funders. We have precedents for micropatronage and crowdfunding through sponsorship drives supporting public access television (PBS) or even the patrons of Renaissance artists like de Vinci and Michelangelo. In the former, audience sponsors retain no

ownership rights or tangible goods, and the later full ownership of the artwork produced. The idea of the audience or benefactor supporting an artist or artists in their work has deep roots in our culture, however the role of the patron or sponsor was relegated to the upper class as the cost of supporting the arts as sponsor being cost-prohibitive for lower-class families and financially supporting an individual artist a la the Medicis is entirely impossible for all but the upper echelon.

However, with micropatronage individuals can make individual or ongoing contributions to artistic endeavors that meet their needs and desires according to their price ability (unlike traditional patronage) and without a gatekeeper (like PBS). By allowing audience-patrons to select the artists and projects, they wish to fund and the price (as little as a dollar) they can afford, the patronage of the arts becomes democratized and communal.

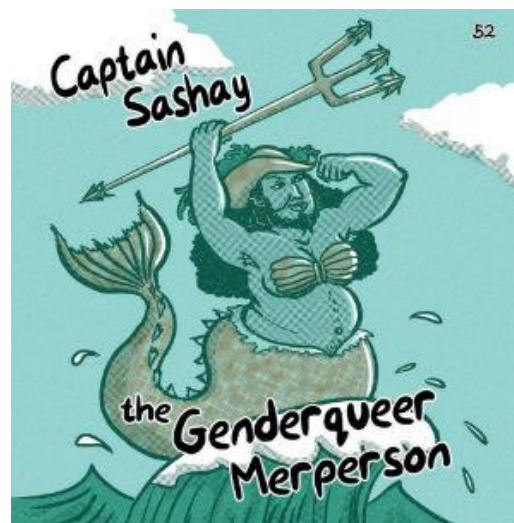
Micropatronage is in the ethos of the gifting economy while acknowledging the current capitalist system in which artists must make a living. With the national defunding of the arts, crowdfunding can be viewed as a neoliberal tool, perpetuating the idea that only "the best" (i.e., the most popular) artistic endeavors should survive. Paul Booth (2015) argues in his essay "Crowdfunding is neoliberalism, not only because it harnesses and normalizes the language of economics. Crowdfunding links commercialized successes with affect and emotion, turning charitable 'feeling' into commercialized payment" (p. 242). However, micropatronage is a donation with no expectation of commodity return; it is an expression of gratitude for the art that has been completed and freely given, as an expression of desire for more. Micropatronage is the communal gift within capitalism's individualistic economic structures.

*Minority Monsters* is a prime example of a queer intertextual commodity that uses alternative financing as a queer gesture. Tab Kimpton is a UK-based artist who has several

webcomics, *Khaos Komix*, and *The Sir, Butler and Boy*. However, he started *Minority Monsters* as a collaborative side project imagining LGBTQ+ identities as fabulous, friendly monsters inhabiting Alphabet Soup Land in the style of a children’s alphabet book. This project was collaborative as audiences voted on what “monster” would be created next.



*Figure 2.4* Cover of *Minority Monsters* webcomic and children's book.



*Figure 2.5* Interior page of *Minority Monsters*, a special request funded by micropatronage.

Special requests could be made using a single micro-donation via Patreon (for colors, matching monsters to an identifier, and even naming). This project was initially conceived as a

collection of one-shot comics that was so well supported by micropatronage offerings that Klimpton re-worked and added to the series creating a cohesive storyline. He eventually created a Kickstarter to mitigate the costs of physical publishing (with contributors receiving the book and other incentives). Finally, he hired local LGBTQ+ actors to play the characters to create an audiobook. Both the audiobook and a digital copy of the comic are available as “pay as you can” downloads. Thus, returning to the gift economy by making the content free to the audience, and the audience then reciprocating through optional micropatronage.

Though micropatronage and crowdfunding generally provide no official legal or financial ownership<sup>12</sup> of the creative projects they fund, they do provide a sense of cultural ownership that is acknowledged by the artists and creatives producing independent media. This “symbolic compensation” (Kustritz, 2015) creates a production culture that encourages audience collaboration in the creative creation of the text, a sense of mutual ownership between audience and creator, and a mutual acknowledgment of the rights of each. The audience directly funding through donation or voluntary subscription fees is a kind of “gift” or “moral” economy, in which fans acknowledge the cultural worth and pleasure a text provides and directly compensates the artist in hopes of additional content. Richard Barbrook (1998), in his essay “The Hi-Tech Gift Economy,” describes the phenomena as users being:

Unconcerned about copyright, they give and receive information without thought of payment. In the absence of states or markets to mediate social bonds, network communities are instead formed through the mutual obligations created by gifts of time and ideas.

It is providing the potential for audiences to embrace transgressive or queer behavior in industrial terms. As Ethan Tussey (2015) states “Fans have revealed the financial potential of financial

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<sup>12</sup> Though there are occasions where even legal and financial ownership is shared, particularly in regards to official fan merchandising.

transparency and direct engagement" entering into the crowdfunding "arrangement as investors, rather than as viewers, [this] is a testament to the way the Internet can make the creative industries more participatory" (p. 172). Audiences and creatives queer traditional media industry practices by relying on "gifts" to support each other financially and artistically, creating a utopian economy through sharing. Through the collaborative authorship required for queer intertextual commodities, the gift economy is well placed as an ideological underpinning of the economic environment.

Yochai Benkler (2004) describes this type of co-production as "social sharing production," where users contribute through free exchange towards a commodity product (p. 278). Alternatively, Koçer (2015) defines communally funded and created projects as "social businesses" and crowdfunding or micropatronage platforms like KickStarter and Patreon as "technologies of publicity." The critical difference between the queer intertextual commodity's use of communal financing in the hybrid gift-economy and that of most social media sites is the transparency of the interaction. It is clearly and publicly stated (ironically enough usually on a social media platform) by both sets of content producers (original IP owners and the audience) what is considered a consumer good, who can share profits in the sale of those goods, and to what percentage. Through this transparency, there is an active give and take between "production" and "audience" over the economic boundaries of the text (and audience) as a commodity. Notable examples of this hybrid economy are fan co-production of official merchandise and fan-produced marketing.

If micropatronage is the audience supporting the artist, then the licensing of fan-made merchandise is the artist sharing not only authorship but capital. Fan crafted items have always existed in a gray legal and commercial area, first in artist's alleys and later in online shops like

Etsy. Avi Santo (2017) describes fan-crafted merchandise as “stuff made by fans and sold to fans as authentic expressions of fannishness. Fan-made merchandise combines craft culture’s fetishistic embrace of hand-made items with claims to authenticity rooted in the crafter’s allegiance to and membership within particular fan communities” (p. 333), and Suzanne Scott (2014) has described these fan-creators as “fan-trepreneurs” that disrupt the gift economy embedded in fan culture. Derek Johnson (2014) in his article “Authorship Up for Grabs” outlines how fans have historically taken on, through textual poaching, the role of licensed *content* creators, providing ancillary texts like novels, games, and products that have not been provided by IP owners (p. 44-49). All of this is to say that fans have a long history of creating, whether material things or textual content, for themselves—under the perceived and often actual threat of legal action.

For example, The Rusty Quill an online production company that runs several podcasts, including *The Magnus Archives*, *Stellar Ferma* and *Outliers*, and uses fan artists for the majority of their official merchandise. Including character designs for *Rusty Quill Gaming* podcast by Anna Landin, an independent webcomic artist (*Grassblades*) featured on everything from t-shirts, mini-skirts, and leggings. In addition to the official show logo of *The Magnus Archives*, the official store merchandise includes work by art student Adrian Bernal better known as aasterii, which includes the logo for Vigilo Operior Audio, a fictional company within the show. The official merchandise store is hosted on the website, Red Bubble, and when a user searches for *The Magnus Archives* on the site both official and unofficial fan-made merchandise are included side-by-side in the results minimizing the distinction between the two for audiences.

Suzanne Scott (2009) would argue that the inclusion and re-sale of fanworks by IP owners is exploitation of fan labor; in fact, she has named this practice the “regifting economy.”

And if that was all that was going on here, I would agree with her. However, where the queer intertextual commodity remediates this historically long-standing tradition of audience exploitation is in two essentially queer and fannish attributes: (1) citation or credit to the fan artist; and (2) financial remuneration. The queer gesture of alternative financing is a reciprocal acknowledgment of the labor involved in creation, both in the public by-line and in paying people for their work—regardless of whether that work was completed as a commission or through creative leisure. These projects are officially extending authorship to audiences as they would to commercially licensed content creators.

Production of the queer intertextual commodity is part of a larger production culture and history of queer media, independent or otherwise. Producers of QIC join queer production cultures such as those around “open TV,” queer cinema, and “queering” viewing practices (Christian, 2018; Doty, 1993). Queer intertextual commodities embrace the hybrid economy and its audience as collaborators, relying on free labor and financial contributions to bolster commercial projects that would not be financially feasible without sharing authorship (cultural, legal) and even financial ownership with the audience in some way. Emotionally real, authentic, and unremarked representations are produced for the camera by the creative industry. Queer production culture relies on self-representation behind and in front of the camera to create sincere and emotionally real representations within complex story worlds. This creates three-dimensional, nuance representation that can grow with audience interactions, each interaction with these characters incorporates audience self-representation into the canonical world. By relying not only on creative production for self-representation but also on audience interaction and input, the queer intertextual commodity begins to disrupt the expectations of production through collaborative self-representation in front and behind the scenes.

## 2.5 Conclusion: Collapsing Boundaries, Queer Utopia and Queer Failure

Queer gestures are markers of the queer intertextual commodity, helping to identify it, but more than that, queer gestures provide what Fiske (1987) channeling Althusser describe as the “hail” of interpellation for the audience (p. 53). The interpellation process, like the queer gesture, is reciprocal in nature and requires the audience to return the hail in order to be successful. In the case of the QIC, the queer gesture is only successful if the audience takes up the invitation, overt or otherwise, to contribute to the co-creative moment or feeling between audience/object. Andre Cavalcante (2018), in his work examining queer utopias/vortexes in Tumblr, states, “these actions may not necessarily be grand political gestures or the kind of collective mobilizations that start movements. But they affirm and legitimate queer difference, opposing the kinds of assimilationist logics that encourage queerness to hide or blend in” (p. 1727). Likewise, the reciprocation of queer gestures are not grand expressions, but small moments shared in community. Interpellation through a queer gesture is not only about creating identity through recognition but the communal co-creation of identity through mutual touch.

Thus, when queer gestures are recognized by audiences the queer intertextual commodity is being extended, rendered more detailed and ornate. Audiences use the structures (queer gestures) provided by the QIC to create a heterotopia, “multiform,” or “interreality” (Booth, 2010; Foucault, 1967; Murray, 1997). Daniel Downes (2005) describes cyberspace as a heterotopia of public memory, in which heterotopia space is a “way of describing multiple domains and their coexistence. Heterotopian spaces are playful and metaphoric... a way of examining the boundaries of significant symbolic sites” (p. 122). Similarly, Janet Murray (1997) describes the “multiform” as a story or object that multiple contradictory versions can simultaneously co-exist outside our ordinary experiences (p. 30). Finally, Paul Booth (2010)

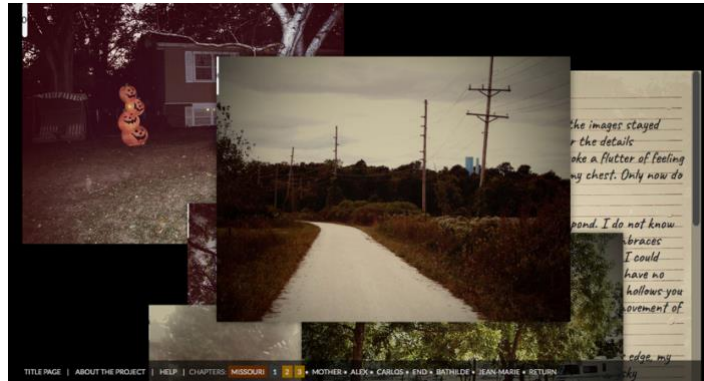


describes interreality as a "digital space that blurs the distinctions between the virtual and the 'real'" (p. 138). Each concept describes similar phenomena or the same phenomenon but from different perspectives. For Downes and Foucault before him, heterotopia is a way of understanding multiplicity and diversity -- organizing modernity and space, whether virtually or materially. Where Murray is trying to reconcile multiplicity within the traditional narrative canon, and Booth is trying to reconcile the coexistence of virtuality and reality within the same space. Ultimately, each is describing an experience of time and space that is outside of ordinary experience that can contain impossible multiplicities.

The impossible multiplicities created by QIC are by their very nature messy, out of time and ordinary space with permeable, collapsing boundaries. The dichotomies and normative structures that organize everyday society breakdown in heterotopic space. *Queerskins: A Novel* is an example of a QIC that is in its heterotopic, boundaryless state. The audience must navigate each component, comprised of a series of interactive collages (image, audio, video, and text), organically with little to no guidance from the artist. Thus, each user creates their own unique, completed world as they explore.



**Figure 2.6** *Queerskins: The Novel* entrance portal.



**Figure 2.7** Interactive collage pager from *Queerskins: The Novel*.

Central author, Illya Szilak (2013) describes *Queerskins* as “Harnessing the modern reader’s capacity to suture disparate pieces of information, *Queerskins* not only subverts conventional authorship and narrative unity, it recapitulates the sedimentary process by which identity is formed” (“About”). The binaries of author/audience, queer/heteronormativity, reality/imaginary, material/virtual, and capital/community dissolve. As a “performative artifact,” QIC audiences experience heterotopic temporality, an “altered time scale, a responsively enigmatic environment” that ultimately is unsustainable (Downes, 2005, p. 133). However, the collapse of the QIC is not a failure in the traditional sense.

The moment of interreality collapse, when all boundaries give way, is a glimpse of a queer utopia. The moment of “queer failure” where the QIC multiform can no longer contain itself is also the moment in which we glimpse a world in which every variation is included, a world that is both set apart from reality and yet is part of the everyday. “Queer failure” is described by J. Halberstam (2011) and José Estaban Muñoz (2009) as a refusal to conform to heteronormative standards or expectations—an escape from reality that is rooted in capitalism (Halberstam, p. 154; Muñoz, p. 88). Muñoz “align(s) failure with a certain mode of virtuosity that helps the spectator exit from the stale and static lifeworld dominated by the alienation, exploitation, and drudgery associated with capitalism” (2009, p. 173). To fail queerly is to break

free, to fail queerly is to see a glimpse of a utopia that is free of oppressive forces—sexual, racial, and capitalistic. The queer intertextual commodity is in a cycle of multiform cocreation, queer failure and the utopic glimpse of a boundaryless interreality. As the QIC collapses in on itself, new contributions to through queer gestures are added, and the cycle begins again, a seemingly endless loop of queer failure/utopia.

However, that is not say that there isn't a "fail state" for the QIC. As a cycle, the QIC must continually be in motion, either growing or collapsing in on itself through queer gestures. When a QIC becomes static, when there is no longer a reciprocal touch between audience and object through the interpellation of queer gestures the QIC has failed in a way that closes off opportunity; it has failed into normativity. There are many ways in which the QIC may no longer function; all are tied to the audience rejecting the queer gesture or "hail" to contribute.

The most common failure is when a QIC has begun prioritizing earning capital over community, such as to actively harm the community that co-creates it. The second failure is the QIC's use of non-intersectional representation in a queer gesture. This is to say that if the QIC begins to affirm racialized oppression within its queer gestures then audiences must choose to reject the gesture—causing a failure of the QIC.<sup>13</sup> Audiences may also reject a QIC because the aesthetic or narrative choices have become too concrete and do not allow for the radical ambiguity necessary for co-creation, or the QIC has limited the audience's interactions or the impact of those interactions within the text. Ultimately, the queer intertextual commodity fails not when it collapses, but when it can no longer interpolate the audience through queer gestures of collaboration.

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<sup>13</sup> There isn't a technology, aesthetic, or audience behavior that cannot be coopted for racist endeavors if bad actors wish to contribute. The best any collaborative project can do to mitigate racist contributors is to make the project inhospitable to these individuals and their ideas by establishing a structure that protects the marginalized within a marginalized community.

The case studies that follow are all more commercial in nature than the examples provided in this theoretical structure. As such, they all succeed in the art of queer failure in that they show glimpses of queer utopia in the collapsing of boundaries. Each example of a queer intertextual commodity uses all four queer gestures: remediation, alternative financing, self-representation, and interactivity. In each QIC, some gestures have stronger hails than others, some gestures are rejected by audiences where others succeed. Regardless, each of these case studies has moments of queer utopia and static death.

### 3 CARMILLA'S META-SELF

There is a certain amount of reflexivity or "meta" required in post-millennial queer texts, as new media content becomes extensively remediated, interactive, and intertextual. For example, in the queer intertextual commodity web series *Carmilla*, the boundaries of the diegetic world and real-life overlap and collapse assisting in the otherworldly nature of the series. Here in the transmedia participatory world of Silas University, it is not only possible for an actress to interact with the fans of the show, but for her to interact with the character she plays.



*Figure 3.1* Twitter interaction between Laura's character account, Elise Bauman the actress who portrays her, and a fan.

Here Elise Bauman tweets to her character Laura, congratulating her on surviving the semester's "big bad" (and the season); fans respond to the meta-interaction. Fans acknowledge the reflexive move with a double entendre and embrace it as an aspect of a world that incorporates much of their reality into an imaginary one that they help to build. There is nothing ordinary about Silas University, where vampires infiltrate fraternities, coeds are sacrificed to an anglerfish god, audience members position themselves as undergrads, and collaborate in creating a fantastical

world in which audiences, actors, and sponsored brand collapse diegetic and non-diegetic worlds.

*Carmilla* is a participatory web series that contributes towards a post-millennial definition of queerness, which centers LGBTQ+ representation while also othering the aesthetics, world building, and commodification of the text. Presenting LGBTQ+ characters without fanfare, the post-millennial queer sensibility embraces a visible queer identity without rendering it down as a fetish or normalizing it out of existence. Instead, it queers or others through the aesthetics of remediation; by collapsing boundaries between the diegetic and non-diegetic; and by queering the commodification of the text and its audience through the use of satire and alternative fan-based financial strategies. Accomplished through gestures of participatory authorship audiences and creatives contribute towards the creation of the queer intertextual commodity, boundaries of queer identity, and the battle over the commodification of all of the above.

Though each case study includes all four queer gestures, this chapter specifically explores the gestures of self-representation and interactivity. Both of which rely on an underlying structure of referents and quotation culture; fandom provides a long-standing social basis for the textual, creative, and industrial process of citation that is essential to the queer intertextual commodity's sense of play and equity. Barbara Klinger (2006) in *Beyond the Multiplex* explores quotation culture and performance as fans recite films from memory. Fans earn cultural capital through their accuracy or fidelity to the original film and through their performance or interpretation of the quote. Extending this fidelity/fertility dynamic into spreadable media, Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) examine the ways in which citation is both created and masked within web 2.0, which is to say that usage and design of web 2.0 both create "breadcrumbs" for

reference, but that it is extremely difficult to locate the original or root source of spreadable media content. However, the desire for breadcrumbs is the desire for citation by users, even as they modify, criticize, and manipulate that content into something new. James Meese (2014) in his article “It Belongs to the Internet” explores the reddit culture of “Aww” animal memes and the focus within the community to locate the original creators and link attribution as part of policing their “karma system.” Meese highlights the amateur content creator’s knowledge of their own exploitation by platforms like Imgur (reddit’s preferred image hosting site) which erases credit/citation in its design and the financial gain by both Imgur and reddit at their expense. The community in addition to linking citation, participated in a type of slacktivism that mapped out boundaries of ownership within their preferred platform, and developed a “mock court” for amateur content creators to defend their ownership rights within the community.

All of this is to say that there is a cultural history, precedent, and expectation that both original IP and fan-created works be cited within community through attribution, providing authorship rights to the creator. With queer intertextual commodities we are now seeing IP owners provide attribution to fan creators for their work through citation, through authorship rights and control, and financial incentives. In the following *Carmilla* case study we can see the ways in which citation interacts with identity and industry through queer gesture to produce a queer intertextual commodity that breaks down barriers between audience and creatives, and the real and the imaginary.

### **3.1 Contextualizing Web Series History and *Carmilla***

As a participatory web series, *Carmilla* is part of a specific internet-based medium with its own history and affordances that is based on the utopic myth of Marshall McLuhan’s “global

village” and net neutrality.<sup>14</sup> Web television, web series, and webisodes are often used interchangeably as they are all referring to original video content distributed online. Here I will primarily use the term web series, which are produced independently of major studios, use a micro-narrative format (3 to 15-minute episodes), and utilizes digital networks for a peer-to-peer distribution. Web series are part of what Aymar Jean Christian (2018) refers to as “open TV,” a movement focused on reimagining television to be inclusive (particularly focused on the intersection of race and sexuality) and created by independent creatives and producers (p. 3-5). Though *Carmilla* and other queer intertextual commodities are in relationship with open television and televisuality more generally, they are also in conversation with a growing trend in social media storytelling.

In their book Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (2019) define social media entertainment (SME) as a “proto-industry fueled by professionalizing, previously amateur content creators using new entertainment and communicative formats to develop potentially sustainable businesses based on significant followings that can extend across multiple platforms” (p. 5). Though Cunningham and Craig focus on influencers their concept of social media entertainment can be applied to queer intertextual commodities that heavily rely on social media not only for the delivery of content and the creation of community through feedback, but also

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<sup>14</sup> To start, in 1993 Larry Press is one of the first individuals to publish on the idea of “interactive television” in *Communications of the ACM* (p. 20). Press argued that the internet’s impact on TV would be through applications embedded in cable systems and remotes. Yet only two years later we have the first major success of a smartphone on the market with the Blackberry and in 2005 YouTube, a major distribution site for streaming video content, is launched. By 2007 when the iPhone launches, the technological stage is set for the rise of web television—web series, webisodes, and “Open TV” (Christian, 2018). Independent web series began sprouting up on The Spot, The Sync, AtomFilms, YouTube and other distribution hubs, while webisode content started to become standard extensions of legacy television (Christian, 2012).<sup>1414</sup> One of the major labor disputes of the 2007-2008 Writer’s Strike was around creative content like webisodes and other transmedia writing (blogs, etc.) being renegotiated for residuals. It is of no surprise that *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along-Blog* a web series created by Joss Whedon in response and in support of the strike became the industrial and critical hit of 2008, earning a special Emmy. A year later, The Streamy Awards were developed specifically to highlight web television as its own art.



audience contributions to the text as is exemplified by *Carmilla*. I position *Carmilla* as a social media entertainment property invested in the concept of open television—that is alternative television made by and for minorities, offering content that was not available in mainstream markets. Functionally, the participatory nature of the series renders it as social media entertainment that is “constituted from intrinsically interactive audience-centricity and appeals to authenticity and community in a commercialized space” despite the pre-scripted video content of the web series (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 149). *Carmilla*'s reliance on social media interaction with audience members and interactive “play” with transmedia content (paraquel novels, vlogs, and PSAs, films) move it beyond a simple single stream web series.

*Carmilla* was created by Jordan Hall and Ellen Simpson in 2014. The Canadian web series debuted on the YouTube channel Vervegirl, which has since been rebranded as KindaTV. *Carmilla* presents a fictional Lovecraftian—esque Silas University in Styria, Austria as the setting of a loose adaption of a Victorian gothic novella by Sheridan Le Fanu, featuring the titular vampire and her female prey. The transmedia series keeps the original premise of a lesbian vampire Carmilla Karnstein (Natasha Negovanlis) and her lover/prey Laura Hollis (Elise Bauman), but flips the gender for the majority of the other characters: S. LaFontaine (Kaitlyn Alexander), Danny Lawrence (Sharon Belle), and J.P. Armitage (Dillon Taylor/Aaron Chartrand). One respondent noted that in *Carmilla*, “Everybody here is queer, except Kirsch. The straight white man is the outlier, which is so strange. Yet they still didn't make him the bad guy; they made him the loveable puppy that literally everyone in the fandom loves.” The series quickly leaves behind any narrative association with its inspiration text, relocating the world of the series to the fictional Silas University in the Styria, Austria.

The primary text is the web series, which has completed three seasons totaling 85 episodes. When airing the web series updates twice a week, and each season completes approximately a semester of story time. The series has a companion show that is branded entertainment for U by Kotex, its sponsor. The characters of *Carmilla* host this show and it prominently features the sponsor brand, with segments on "Menstruation Mythbusters," "Do Vampires Get Periods?" and "The Greatest Underwarrior." Further, the information, sets, and costuming for these segments are incorporated into the main show during that season. Unlike televisual companion shows like *The Talking Dead*, this intra-textual branded entertainment contributes toward the world building of the narrative. Additionally, the QIC also has several canonical social media accounts, podcasts, and books all of which center queer characters and focus on otherworldly plotlines, romance, and mystery.

### **3.2 Normalizing Deviancy: Making the Queer (of Color) Everyday**

*Carmilla* does not mask its association with queer culture and instead revels in it, by featuring minority self-representation with its female dominated production and cast; *Carmilla* tackles issues of gender and sexual orientation, along with the ongoing serial storylines. To begin, none of the characters have a "coming out" sequence, or even explicitly state their sexual preferences, instead their actions, storylines, and performance relay to the audience their romantic interests. One fan stated in an interview, "There's queer representation, and it's casual... They're actually doing stuff, and their important, and they also happen to be gay." In her 2016 study, Stephanie Skinner surveyed *Carmilla* fans and discovered that the most influential reason (59.6%) for audiences to tune in was for the abundance of queer female characters, and for 40.6% of the survey respondents the queer-normative narrative was very

influential and for 39.7% it was the most influential aspect of the series (p. 22).<sup>15</sup> Unlike, earlier queer texts *Carmilla* and the queer intertextual commodity does not rely on subcultural coding that can be interpreted by the intended queer readers and ignored by mainstream audiences. Post-millennial queer texts bring LGBT+ romantic liaisons to the surface and center of the series. Making these relationships visible, but not othered.

For example, early in season one, Laura expresses a romantic crush on her English Lit TA to her vlog audience. A few episodes later, Danny (said TA) makes a guest appearance on the vlog, where the audience learns that Danny is a woman (“Town Hall”). The episode proceeds to share an excruciatingly cute interview between the two, as Laura awkwardly flirts, at one point saying to Danny, “It’s nice to have you.... Uh, it’s nice to have you here.” The two then describe the “town hall” meeting, which happened off-screen – including discussion of the missing girl epidemic; the Adonis festival and hunt; the alchemy club’s fungus experiments, and night marches. Finally ending the sequence with Danny picking debris out of Laura’s hair, and suggesting that they team up for research. Once Danny leaves to get her notes, Laura starts an excited victory dance. By presenting this lesbian relationship in such a manner, the series normalizes and universalizes the queer (LGBTQ+) representation within a “young love” narrative.

Beyond romantic relationships, *Carmilla* presents those considered traditionally as “nonconformist others” as ordinary in a fantastical world. One of the main characters of the show is LaFontaine, who is a non-binary presenting science nerd, a particular oddity on a campus where magic exists. However, it is her use of science in addressing issues of vampirism, and sentient card catalogs (she downloads the consciousness named J.P. to her flash drive) that

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<sup>15</sup> Skinner’s survey had 436 respondents over the course of a single week. These results are from a Likert section of the survey investigating the “influences surrounding initial interest in *Carmilla*.”

makes her queer in the eyes of Silas students, not her presentation as genderqueer. The web series completes almost an entire season before definitively addressing the issue of LaFontaine's gender ambiguity. LaFontaine was born female with a given name of Susan that her childhood best friend Perry insists on using despite LaFontaine's objections. Late in season one, Perry and LaFontaine argue over the reckless embracing of "the insanity" of Silas ("The Standard Issue").

In which, the following conversation ensues:

**P:** That doesn't mean you have to fling yourself into every weird situation headfirst, like this nonsense where you won't even let me call you Susan anymore.

**LaF:** That's because I don't want to be Susan anymore.

**P:** Well, that's too bad she was my friend. I don't even know who you are anymore.

Though this argument is clearly devastating to LaFontaine and is highlighting gender-queerness, it is the aftermath of this argument, with the support of the Silas community for LaFontaine that normalizes the situation. From this episode, we see Laura console LaFontaine by offering comfort through junk food, and bad sci-fi movies. Through Twitter and Tumblr interactions between vlog audiences and characters the world of Silas is quick to establish inclusive language for the character, preferred pronouns are "they/them" and to change all tags to simple "LaFontaine" without the Susan (fyeahcarmilla). Even Perry adjust to LaFontaine's gender presentation when confronted by the potential of her friend being lost (to mind controlling parasites and an Anglerfish Gods) thus, the P-MQ text prioritized friendship over labels ("PTSD & Brownies"). Reminding audiences and characters alike that it is the world that is "weird," and not our differences that make us queer.

Though *Carmilla* does well with making queer identities normalized, unremarkable, or ordinary within the text, it failed to truly center intersectionality in the initial casting of the show,

as the cast is entirely white (save one minor character). The lack of racial and ethnic diversity was felt by the audience as not only an oversight by production, but as a slight by a predominately white production team. The fervor for the web series both positive and negative from fans established both a desire for a season two *and* for casting changes. In her book, *Squee from the Margins*, Rukmini Pande (2018) describes audience negotiation of the simultaneous feelings of “squee” or pure enjoyment of media and the feelings of resentment and/or righteousness of the “social justice warrior” found in social media spaces like Tumblr (p. 46). Fans of color and other marginalized groups within fandom (and society) are most often put into this position within fandom. Both defending their enjoyment of a text and their criticism of the text.

The desire for more diversity within the cast belies the reach of the series, which has been viewed more than 71 million times in over 193 countries (Ahearn, 2018). With the demand for more diversity within the series, production attempted to rectify the situation through public apology, industry discourse, and additional casting. It’s no surprise that the official production apology came from Steph Ouaknine, one of the producers and the only above-the-line queer of color in production. In an interview with *The Geekiary* Ouaknine states, “It was a conscious desire in season one that we were unable to service properly. Going union this season, we were able to see a wider group of talented performers of various ages and color, hence the new cast members” (2015).

The party line from production is that as a non-union shoot, they were unable to procure quality actors of color in initial casting. Instead of “damaging the quality of performance” they chose to hire white actors who would work for less. Interestingly, according to a study commissioned by Ontario Creates and ACTRA itself, only 23% of ACTRA members self-

identify as ethnically diverse (persons of color, Aboriginal people, visible minorities, and/or persons of mixed race) between 2011 and 2015 (*Ontario ACTRA Census*, 2019). With additional funding (and demands for diversity from the audience) the sponsor (Kotex) paid for the series to become an ACTRA (union) shoot and all of the cast's union fees for season two. Essentially, lifting up a predominately white cast industrially and economically over hiring a qualified *and* diverse cast from the outset.

To be clear, I firmly believe that the co-creators intended to create a diverse show at conception, but in the realities of production it was more important to get the series made than it was stick to every ideal—tellingly queer representation was of greater importance than racial diversity for Kotex and therefore production. In an interview with me, co-creator Jordan Hall stated that “[she] was unsurprised, and glad to have evidence that diversity was of concern to the audience—which gives you more leverage with decision makers [like sponsors]. We’d pushed for more diverse casting from the outset but failed in Season One due to a combination of budget concerns and lack of networks for accessing an adequate pool of diverse performers” (J. Hall, personal communication, May 13, 2019).

However, adding characters of color to the show in season two was not the panacea for the criticism that the creative team had hoped. Social media writer and story editor, Ellen Simpson, in her interview with me expressed frustration with the audience response to the new casting. She stated, “Then we were accused of tokenism, accused of all of our people of color being villains or cast in negative light (the mean girl, the jerk). The audience reaction was interesting, as we were damned if we do and damned if we don’t. We did what the audience asked for, we brought in characters of color, but then the audience still wasn’t happy with what we did” (E. Simpson, personal communication, April 12, 2019). However, Jordan Hall

understood that the show and its casting, “would create a heightened environment around representation (LGBTQ+ representation in the room was strong, but we didn’t have a diverse writing staff... but given that we wanted a diverse cast, I was already prepared to engage in dialogue and rewrites if characters that I’d written ‘colourblind’ became representational issues in combination with the embodied reality of a specific diverse performer” (J. Hall, personal communication, May 13, 2019).

Clearly, the perception of industrial constraints impacted the diversity of the series despite the best intentions of the creative team, even as fans demanded more diversity and better representation from production. Fans of color are often put into the position of being a “fandom killjoy,” where their pleasure or desire for pleasure is perceived to be a threat to the pleasure of the non-marginalized or mainstream fan or in this case production (Pande, 2018, p. 13). Here, in *Carmilla*, we can see production employing some of the same rhetoric of rejection of the fandom killjoy that Pande describes in her book, as well as the desire to provide (if failed) pleasure for fans of color.

### **3.3 Audience Self-Representation**

The *Carmilla* series uses in-character social media accounts on Twitter and Tumblr to extend the world building and backstory for the main characters Laura Hollis (Laura2TheLetter) and Carmilla Karnstein (HeyCarmilla), as well as supporting character LaFontaine (LaFliphormes). There are also canonical accounts for Silas University and the Voice of Silas (school newspaper). Production has described these accounts as “lateral world-building” through transmedia storytelling, which was particularly important in a series with a single fixed camera set-up (E. Simpson, personal communication, April 12, 2019). The in-world social media

accounts regularly provide additional world-building information, from narrative points to favorite bands and TV shows.

While transmedia storytelling and world building is relatively new, it is not particularly an innovative strategy. Television has used transmedia extension via websites, blogs, and games since the 1990s. Jennifer Gillan (2011) in *Must Click TV* examines the ways in which television “flow” and new media “overflow” intersect transmedia world-building and industry audience gathering. As an industrial strategy, transmedia embraces fans eagerness to explore new worlds and character backgrounds, and using digital technology provides “Easter Eggs” to be found. In mainstream transmedia storytelling or world extension, audiences can only discover and connect narrative pieces—they are active but not agented within the world.

A major innovation of the queer intertextual commodity is in the way it deploys transmedia tactics to foreground queer gestures of self-representation and interactivity allowing audiences agency within these transmedia extensions to contribute towards the world building. For example, in *Carmilla* and similar projects, audience explorative play are not bound solely to discovery. Instead, audiences can interact with the characters through their social media accounts. These interactions between character and audience are considered canon by both production and audience. Thus, the viewing audience can become a collaborator and participant within the world, with the potential to alter the narrative or extend the world of Silas University. Through these interactions, the audience is participating in the worldbuilding, creating classes, clubs, and even friendships or relationships. As the world's initial creators consider canonical any interaction between the characters and the audience, the role of authorship extends to the viewer (Wolf, 2012, p. 267).



In her interview, Ellen Simpson, the head of social media storytelling, explained that there were limitations to these interactions for both practical and narrative reasons. On a practical level, she physically couldn't respond to every "ask" (interaction request), as there were far more requests than one person could handle. Narratively, she would not respond to any social media account using an existing character name as she didn't want to favor one fan's version of a character over another. Therefore, only fan-created original characters or fans presenting as themselves could be included through the social media feeds. However, within these limitations fans created new characters, classes, and clubs in the world of Silas University. They also prompted some characters background details to be highlighted over others, based on fan interest. These canonical interaction makes the world of Silas University in Styria, Austria a participatory one. In this manner, the world of *Carmilla* is innovative and innately queer by extending agency to the audience in a way that is truly participatory—where queer audiences represent themselves within the text as agented beings.

The diegetic world and the real world begin to overlap and collapse in Silas University creating a queer impossible space, which is made visible through the transmedia interactions between audience and characters. The mixture of story world and real world create an *Alice in Wonderland* effect that is interactive and participatory, yet out of control of the audience and the original creators. Through social media interactions this post-millennial queer space is co-authored in a variety of ways. There are several types of audience interactions. Self-assimilation is when audience members incorporate their real identities into the fictional world, often to address complicated identity issues in a safe space. Another common interaction is when audience members create original characters to include in the world, much like creating a new avatar in an MMORPG. Both types of audience self-representations are presented below.

### 3.3.1 *Self-Assimilation*

Self-representation is one of the queer gestures highlighted in the queer intertextual commodity. For any minority group, it is essential to reclaim authority over their media representations, which have historically been created by individuals from the dominant (oppressive) culture(s). By investing in material created by and for LGBTQ+ people, audiences reclaim their voice more generally. By supporting and investing narratively to queer intertextual commodities, LGBTQ+ audiences reclaim their voices specifically. Within *Carmilla*, there are two forms of audience self-representation, where LGBTQ+ audiences represent themselves and their identities in the text. Assimilation of self is the first type of audience-world interaction where audience members interact with the characters as themselves, not as imaginary characters within the world, and the world reacts as if the audience member is part of the world. Whereby, audience members are pulled into the story context, and incorporates their real online identity into the story world. The contributions or queer gestures are a self-representational performance that is often an outlet for identity construction for queer youth. Jama Shelton (2008) states,

Self-representational performance is one means though which queer young people may begin to develop and utilize languages of their own, focusing and strengthening their unique voices... Through the creation of self-representational performance a powerful shift occurs in which queer young people become the authors of their own lives and the creators of their own culture (p. 69-70).

Playing with self-representation through media interactions and having those contributions recognized and assimilated into the media text is a powerful validation of identity, especially when that inclusion is into a virtual world that has normalized your identity when the physical world may not.

This type of audience member would be considered a "diver" by Ross (2008, 180), and someone who has become "absorbed" by the world by Wolf (2012, pp. 49 & 375). The vast

majority of these interactions read as audience members' being curious about a particular element of backstory, generally using the interactive function as a method of engagement with the storytellers. I was fortunate enough to interview Ellen Simpson the social media coordinator for *Carmilla* at ClexaCon in 2019, where she explained that the social media interactions were a way to "build the world sideways instead of forward" or "laterally" to diversify the world and without sponsor interference. These interactions expand the world building and transmedia narrative based on audience interest and contribution.

Andre Cavacante (2018) in "Tumbling Into Queer Utopias and Vortexes" argues that LGBTQ+ youth utilize Tumblr as a queer archipelago replacing traditional physical queer spaces with a virtual one that is both a vortex and a utopia. Vortexuality was originally termed by Gary Whannel (2010) in reference to the ways in which news media can create a tornado funnel effect around a single news story. Cavacante modifies this terminology for social media users, referencing the feeling of "falling into a hole" or "being sucked in" that his participants described. He states, "in the context of media audiences, vortexuality is a process of intense user engagement with media for a delimited amount of time" (Cavalcante, 2018, p. 13). The vortex experience can be both a positive and negative experience and has the potential to narrow one's worldview or become an echo-chamber, which can be dangerous. However, as a queer utopia Tumblr's infrastructure allow for multiplicity, anonymity, and a re-centering of queer experiences through open-source plug-ins and modifiers. Socially, the platform and social media more generally, allow "queer youth to practice intimate storytelling, as they digitally narrate their identities and lives for a likeminded audience" (Cavalcante, 2018, p. 5). The queer utopia glimpsed in Tumblr is collective and founded in the exploration of intersectional identities and the protection of those expressions in what is often a militant way. The fierce protective nature of

the LGBTQ+ youth community on Tumblr is associated with the term “social justice warriors.” This intersection of real identity, social media anonymity, and social media storytelling is where we find audience self-assimilation as a means of collaborative authorship.

Perhaps the most notable example of self-assimilation featured in the social media accounts is between a Tumblr user and Carmilla presented below:

**Ask:** Hey Carmilla... I was wondering if you could give me some advice seeing as you have experience with manipulative family members. My dad is an alcoholic. We had an intervention but I caught him pouring real wine into empty non-alcoholic wine bottles that we got him. I came out as gay to him three months ago. We both know that my mum won't take it well and he promised not to tell her. But now he says if I tell her about him drinking he will tell her I am gay. What do I do?

**HeyCarmilla:** You should probably tell your mother now, before your father does, cutie. Keeping secrets is bad for your health, When a loved one isn't in their right mind about something they may lash out and say u things they don't mean, things that they were told in confidence. If you're worried, just say the words when you know you'll feel safe. Write a letter maybe, or do it over the phone if you're worried how she'll react in person. It's better coming from you than your father. Just make sure you're safe, and have chocolate. Chocolate helps with everything. (29 August 2015)

Though the character theoretically has the life experience to deal with this situation (400 years), the production team treaded carefully in including this individual into the story world. I was fortunate enough to interview Ellen Simpson the social media coordinator for *Carmilla* and the individual who read and responded to all comments and questions as the characters. Ellen stated that this response was a collaborative effort, as she reached out to the audience member directly to confirm that she was truly on-board with including this post in the official social media feeds for the series. Ellen stated, “I knew she would get all the support from the community—we should be validating and make her feel better about coming out, which is important, but I also knew that was a lot of dirty laundry to air out in a public space.” Ellen continued, explaining that almost the entire cast and creative team were in conversation with the asker and part of the creation of Carmilla's response. It was essential for Ellen and the rest of the production team that

they provide both publicly and privately sound advice for the situation and so they relied on PFLAG recommendations for the base of the response while incorporating Carmilla's language style and humor.

However, Ellen continued that this was not the norm for their social media production, which rarely reached out behind the scenes to confirm the inclusion of a post in the feed. Usually, Ellen was looking for asks or posts that were "organic" to the cinematic moment or world, where the question "allows this character to do something in the space that we couldn't write into the show because we were stuck in a room, or because we are beholden to a brand that keeps notes that were fairly homophobic at the beginning, which was an interesting time for *Carmilla*, the lesbian web series." Further, Ellen built the character's social media presence as general users do, by re-blogging content based on the character's interests, sense of style and humor, with no consideration made to incorporating fan-made or general user-generated content into their intellectual property, though citation to the original poster was always included. In our interview, Ellen voiced this as one of her regrets, and if she were to do a similar project in the future she would ask before including content from general platform users (mood boards, memes, etc.). The *Carmilla* production was fortunate to not have anyone request that they remove posts.

Though this fan interaction is one of the more extreme examples of audience self-insertion into the world of Silas most self-assimilation into the world are far more mundane. These interactions are more likely to dig into the characters' lives off-screen or into their background. One survey respondent commented that audiences are collaborators because, "They help fill out the characters and the world in a way that would not have the same meaning without

the interaction.” In this example from Twitter, a fan, as himself, prompts the character of Carmilla to provide more information about Laura and fan-favorite minor character Mattie:



*Figure 3.2 Carmilla’s Twitter account interacts with a fan.*

Though there are in-character accounts on both Tumblr and Twitter, Twitter is structured more democratically for these types of interactions as anyone can publicly interact with characters by tagging them, whereas Tumblr you can only interact by “asking” the character accounts and waiting for a re-blog and reply. Industrially, Twitter allows Ellen to see which audience questions or comments are receiving more attention by fellow fans and responding to those Tweets in-character. Thus, fans individually and collectively are contributing to the expansion of the world.

### 3.3.2 *Fan-Created Original Characters*

The second form of audience self-representation to be found in *Carmilla* is that of fan-created original characters who interact with the cast, and each other, through social media accounts. Again, LGBTQ+ audiences are free to create characters that represent themselves or who they wish to be on screen to become a canonical part of the queer intertextual commodity. As audience members, they are highly invested in the world, taking on aspects of the imaginary through their engagement. Their interaction requires the story world's response via imaginary characters. With original character accounts the audience member intends to role play as a fictional character within the story world of Silas University. Often fans play as existing characters who do not have production-created canonical accounts, so there are a myriad of versions of Mattie or J.P. for instance on both Tumblr and Twitter. However, these accounts are not considered canonical by production because they never interact with the canon character accounts. This is purposeful, as production did not want to prioritize one fan's version of a character over another. Instead, social media writer, Ellen Simpson, chose to only interact with fan-made original characters—that is new characters to the story world. This creative decision provided an equitable playing field for fans to expand the world of Silas and to play within the series and with each other.

Original character role play interactions are structurally related to both fanfiction and games, however this iteration of the queer gesture departs from fanfiction in one key way—these interactions are canonically part of the queer intertextual commodity's world. In terms of fanfiction, Stephanie Skinner (2016) in her thesis “Queer Subjectivity, Transmedia and Embodiment in the *Carmilla* Fandom,” argues that the transmedia storytelling elements are akin to production putting in “fanfic requests” of the audience. She states, “transmedia storytelling

allows for fan engagement through social media role play and archontic [Derrida's archival] narratives" (p. 28). However, the social media storytelling implemented with *Carmilla* is unlike traditional fanfiction, which exists outside of canon. It is also unlike other social media extensions, as it is interactive and allows audience contribution to be pulled into the story world. In this way, it is similar to that of role-playing games in structure. Darshana Jayemanne (2017) in *Performativity in Art, Literature, and Videogames* argues that there are three types of gamic performative acts: the ludic (rule/mechanic), the illudic (play), and the perludic (narrative) (pp. 232 & 245). Role-play is primarily a perludic act.<sup>16</sup> According to Jayemanne, "*Perludic acts* are those *by which something playful is done*" (2017, p. 242).<sup>17</sup> That is to say that audience creating original characters and performing as them are narrative in nature and allow for play through the text. The platform constraints, and production's limitation to only interact with original characters are the rules or ludic acts of the game.

Examples of fan-created original character interactions can be found on both Tumblr and Twitter. Tumblr is generally a better platform for original characters as users can easily curate multiple usernames on the same account. These new original characters are generally presented as Silas students—people who know Laura and Carmilla through classes or student organizations. Occasionally, original characters present as enemies associated with the current season's antagonists, or more generally as douchey fraternity bros.

Below we can see a Tumblr user ask to borrow a textbook from Laura, this interaction establishes that Laura is taking a class not mentioned in the main text, *Art of the Medieval Siege*. It also extends the alchemy clubs workings on campus beyond mere experimenting to practical

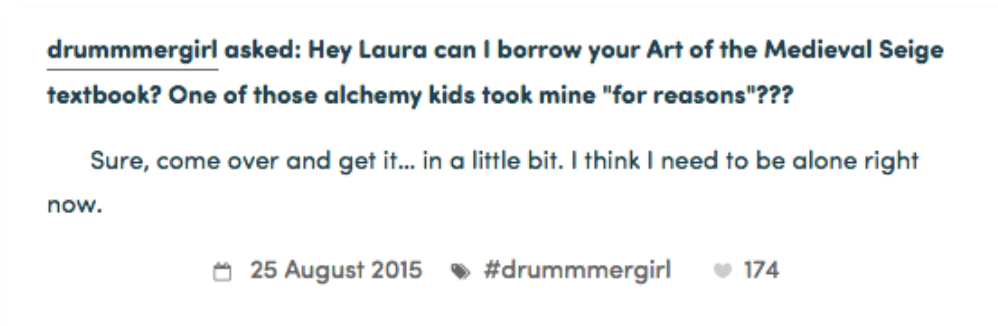
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<sup>16</sup> Perlocution is an act of speaking or writing which has an action as its aim but which in itself does not effect or constitute the action, for example persuading or convincing.

<sup>17</sup> Emphasis in original.

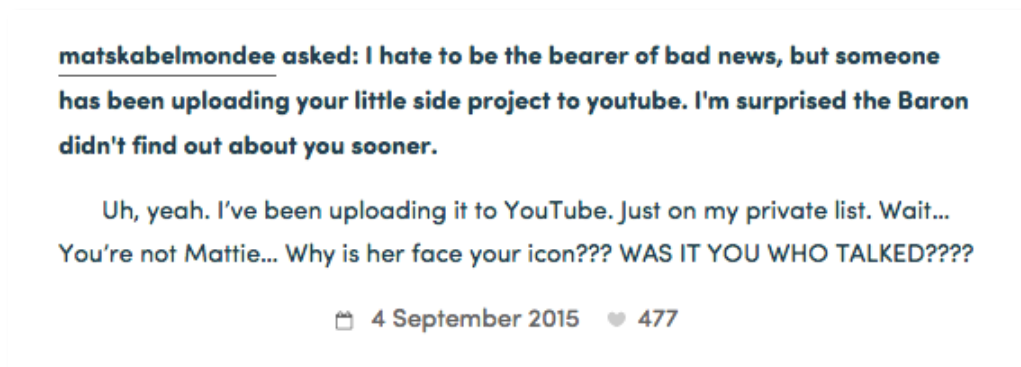


application, which is later used in the main series. Finally, Laura's response expands on her emotional state post the town hall scare by the dean (that season's big bad).



*Figure 3.3 Fan on Tumblr asks Laura's character account to borrow a textbook in character.*

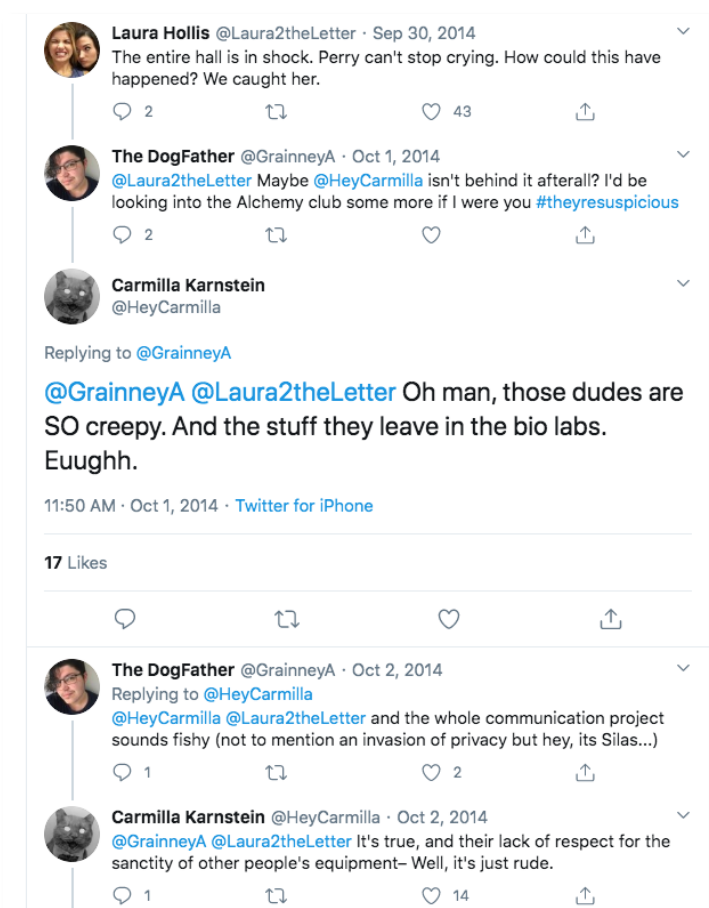
Alternatively, we see the following Tumblr post initially as a follower of Laura's vlog assignment, so a Silas student. However, the post attempts to break the 4<sup>th</sup> wall by mentioning the video distribution service used by the creative team (as opposed to the in-world ethernet service, Silas News Network). Laura's response is to affirm that she is also uploading to YouTube, and then to de-rail the inquiry by twisting the fan character into a position of spy or leak. This interaction begins to play with the boundary between the imaginary/real or the meta around *Carmilla*, which will be discussed at length further on.



*Figure 3.4 Tumblr fan interacts with Laura's account in character.*

As you can see, the exchange between fan-created character and Laura are one shot volleys as Tumblr uses a closed ask system for these exchanges. Therefore, they are limited in duration, but not necessarily in impact.

Twitter exchanges are public and are not limited to one comment in this way. So, some of the original character exchanges go back and forth and can often include multiple users in the same conversation. In the conversation below, Laura, Carmilla, and a fan-created character discuss the possibility of the alchemy club being involved in a conspiracy on campus.



*Figure 3.5 Twitter exchange between Laura, Carmilla, and fan in character.*

Or in this example, a fan created a character on Twitter to troll Carmilla. It is unclear if this character is trolling “in-character” as his handle is @Willful\_Zeta, referencing a fraternity at

Silas that Carmilla doesn't like, or if the actual audience member is hate-watching the series and is then making fun of the character. Either way, the social media storytelling function of the transmedia world allows for audiences to not only contribute through original characters and extending the world, but also point out character or narrative flaws, such as Carmilla's perceived cowardice at this point in the story.<sup>18</sup>



*Figure 3.6 Carmilla and a fan's character account interact.*

The social media interactions that are part of the transmedia storytelling are one of the ways in which audiences collaborate with traditional content creators in the creation of the text. Authorship can be envisioned as a series of nesting Matryoshka dolls,<sup>19</sup> those who contribute towards the core of the text are central authors and the smallest, most centered doll. In an interview with me, Jordan Hall, the web series scriptwriter and cocreator stated, "I think of

<sup>18</sup> Carmilla has fled Silas University and the swarm of insects (a plague brought on by the anglerfish god under the campus. Presumably she has left her friends and lover to die, but she eventually returns with a magical sword.

<sup>19</sup> Authorship as concentric circles of authorship is conceived by Mark J. P. Wolf in *Building Imaginary Worlds* (2010, p. 268-287).

myself as the primary “author” of the web series. From there, I feel like claims to ‘authorship’ expand in circles around me... (Authorship) depends on where you draw the boundary of the media text” (J. Hall, personal communication, May 13, 2019). Another layer out would be Ellen Simpson who created, wrote, and managed the social media feeds. Outside that would be the creators for the novels, podcasts etc. Traditionally, fan works would not be considered part of the doll, but the children playing with the doll. Jordan continues to explain that, “The choice to integrate the twitter feeds and allow for live audience interaction was part of the project from its conception. From my perspective this meant that the social media feeds were part of the format from the beginning, and therefore canon from the start.” By incorporating fan interactions into the story, some audience responses were then pulled into the circle of authorship. However, Jordan makes a distinction between audience response and audience interaction, between contribution and co-authorship. This distinction is also felt by fans who frequently preferred the term collaborator or contributor over co-author.

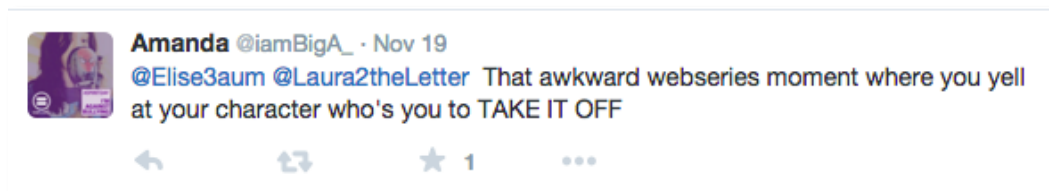
Overwhelmingly audience respondents stated that they preferred collaborator or contributor over co-author in regard to terminology. One respondent put it succulently, “I’d consider audiences collaborators, particularly for media that share experiences this way, but not authors.” Forty-three percent (43%) of audience survey respondents indicated that the boundaries of authority or authorship depended on the text and context of the project. The specification relates to the content creator’s invitation to participate. Fans stated in surveys and interviews: “Only when the creators expect that role from the audience;” “It depends on the project. If it were something that relied heavily on audience input, then yes, they are collaborators;” and “It depends on level of involvement. If they are literally adding to the storyline, script, and character development and arcs, then I’d say yes.” Only 19% of survey

participants flatly gave audiences co-authorship, one *Carmilla* fan in an interview stated, “Absolutely this indie type of media relies on the audiences and the audience plays a huge role in how a queer storyline plays out.” Whereas 38% flatly refused audience any creative rights. One survey respondent stated, “I don’t, because it is just too broad—there’s too many voices for me to consider it true collaboration,” taking on the issue of logistics and control as ultimately production does have final say. Others took issue with legal definitions and economic (consumer) transactions: “No, ownership or authorship presents a minefield of issues including rights to the body of work. Audience collaboration tends to corrupt the body of work.” Others believe that this type of contribution is still firmly in the gift economy, “I don’t believe so. More like... the audience ‘donates’ ideas that the creator of the project can choose to use.” Despite those with reservations, the majority of the audience believe that objects in this study like *Carmilla* allow for audience canonical contribution in some, if not well-defined, way.

### **3.4 Meta-Interaction: The Collapse of Worlds**

Finally, the most notorious of transmedia social media interactions is that of the meta-interaction. A prime example of a meta-interaction is between the actress, Elise Bauman, and her character Laura Hollis on Twitter. Elise regularly responds to and interacts with her fictional character and audience members can’t help but take notice of the break in the fourth wall between diegetic and non-diegetic space. Often these interactions are mere emotional touch points highlighted for the audience. However, on occasion these "meta" moments are integral to the narrative and amplify their importance through repetition in both diegetic and non-diegetic worlds, creating a sync point from which audiences, both "interior" vlog and "exterior" web series, can then proceed. In the example below we see Laura’s post about a necklace she believes is a gift from Carmilla. However, the actress who plays Laura, Elise, knows that this is not the

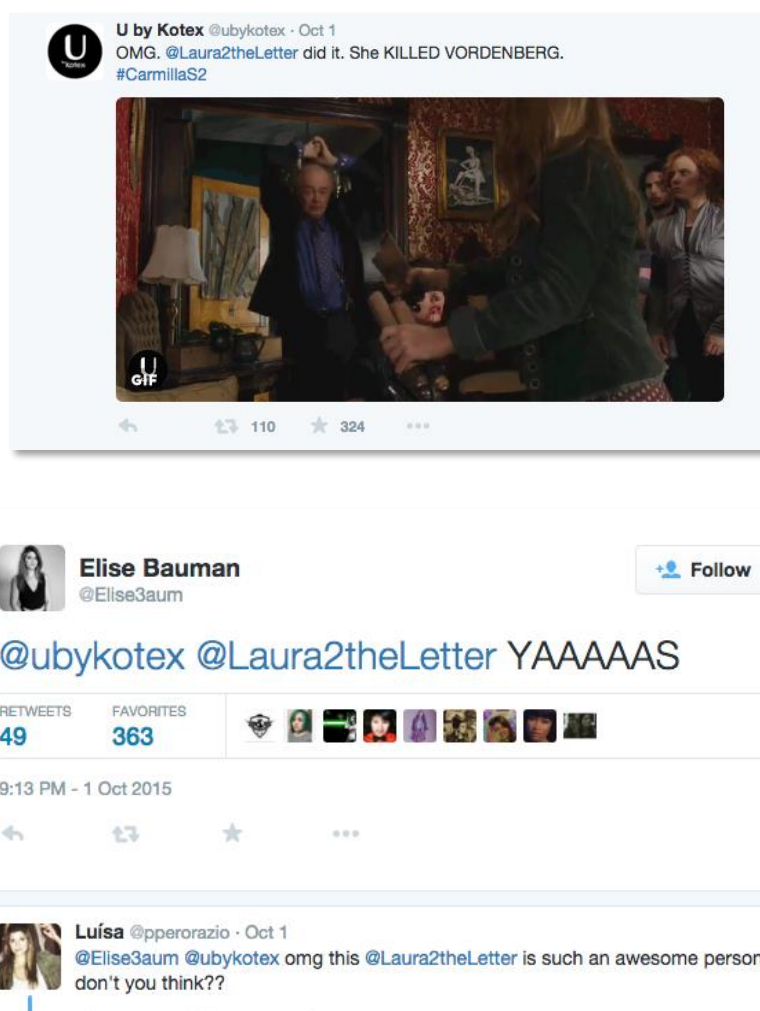
case and encourages Laura to not wear it as it is cursed. Finally, a fan interjects to comment on the meta-textual aspect of the encounter.



*Figure 3.7 Excerpts from a Tumblr thread between character, actress, and fan.*

The overlapping and collapsing nature of the diegetic and non-diegetic transmedia world building is evident in these meta-moments. Thus, the transmedia boundaries become almost entirely obliterated when the companion show's sponsor inserts itself not only into the

branded entertainment program but also into the interactive expansion of the Silas University world. U by Kotex, by congratulating Laura on the defeat of the Dean, and Elise responding as herself (not in character) with affirmation queer the collapsing diegetic and non-diegetic world that is Silas University by collapsing the boundary between real and imaginary.



**Figure 3.8** Excerpts from Tumblr thread between sponsor brand U by Kotex's brand account (unaffiliated with Carmilla account production), character account, and fan.

It is evident from the first audience response that the collective is trying to repair the larger-than-normal hole in the boundaries between the real world and the world of Silas. It becomes quickly apparent, looking at the branded entertainment of Season Zero, that this overlap or collapse is a permanent addition to the transmedia participatory world. An essential aspect of othering in post-

millennial queer texts is blurring the lines between the real and the imagined, the representation and the simulation. While the boundaries between worlds collapse with social media interactions they also contribute towards the absorption of the audience into the world, extending the remediated space, increasing issues of ambiguity, consumerism, and labor.



#### 4 QUEERLY CARMILLA

The previous chapter explored self-representation and interactivity through social media in the case study *Carmilla*. It highlighted the meta-textual aspects of these exchanges that allows fans to contribute towards the queer intertextual commodity in canonical ways. However, *Carmilla* has vast transmedia world within its intertextual commodity ranging from the social media accounts discussed previously to branded content, novels, and of course the web series itself. Here you will see some of the ways in which the queer intertextual commodity, *Carmilla*, distances itself from its corporate sponsor, Kotex, over time. Evolving a hybrid economy model and a post-millennial queer sensibility that queers capitalist practices through the queer gestures of interactivity (intertextual play), remediation, and alternative finance. Whereas the previous chapter focused on canonical collaboration with the producers of the narrative, this chapter focuses on the transmedia peripheral materials that contextualize and further engulf the QIC with significance.

In particular, I explore aspects of intertextual play that are more paratextual in nature, including a continued look into the uncensored, independent, and canonical social media feeds associated with *Carmilla*, and the quasi-official fan texts of *Carmilla Feels HQ* (Tumblr/Twitter) and *StyriaTypical* (podcast). Additionally, I examine the ways in which remediation as an aesthetic works within *Carmilla* to allow for audience engagement within the imaginary space of the series. Finally, the majority of this chapter examines the ways in which alternative financing strategies are used to negotiate the traditional business strategies of single sponsorship and branded entertainment through micropatronage and official fan-made merchandise. This chapter provides details on the remaining three queer gestures within the queer constellation—

highlighting the ways in which audiences and creatives collaborate through nontraditional uses of traditional structures.

Where queer intertextual commodities differ from their predecessors is in the recognition of fan labor through both citation *and* capital. Recognition of fan labor individually and generally is a core value in both queer and fan cultures. Recognition is a reciprocation that is necessary for community creation. In terms of alternative or indie media this reciprocity is essential to long-term commercial and cultural success. Rebecca Tushnet (2007) has famously equated fandom as a culture of credit through the affect economy through likes, shares, kudos, and comments. Whereas Judith Butler (1990) famously states that “citation is a key practice of identity formation,” creating gender and subcultural identity—through aspirational reference (p. 225). We can see an example of LGBTQ+’s rich cultural practices of citation in ball culture’s families and naming practices. The culture of citation has even become structurally embedded in the re-blog mechanisms of social media a fundamental affordance of the digital age (Ahmed, 2004). Though citation is foundational it is not common practice for creatives (those believed to be higher up in the traditional media hierarchies) to cite fan works as inspirational and certainly not canonical. Yet, queer intertextual commodities typically do just that.

Queer intertextual commodities manipulate transmedia’s traditionally top-down hierarchical structure (both textually and financially) to allow audience-contributors agency in discovery and in creation. Further, it provides financial incentives for audience members who co-create as sponsors or as licensed ancillary merchandisers. Embracing a more ethical hybrid economy that, yes, relies on fan labor, but also rewards that fan labor with affective and financial recognition.

## Map of the Queer Intertextuality Commodity

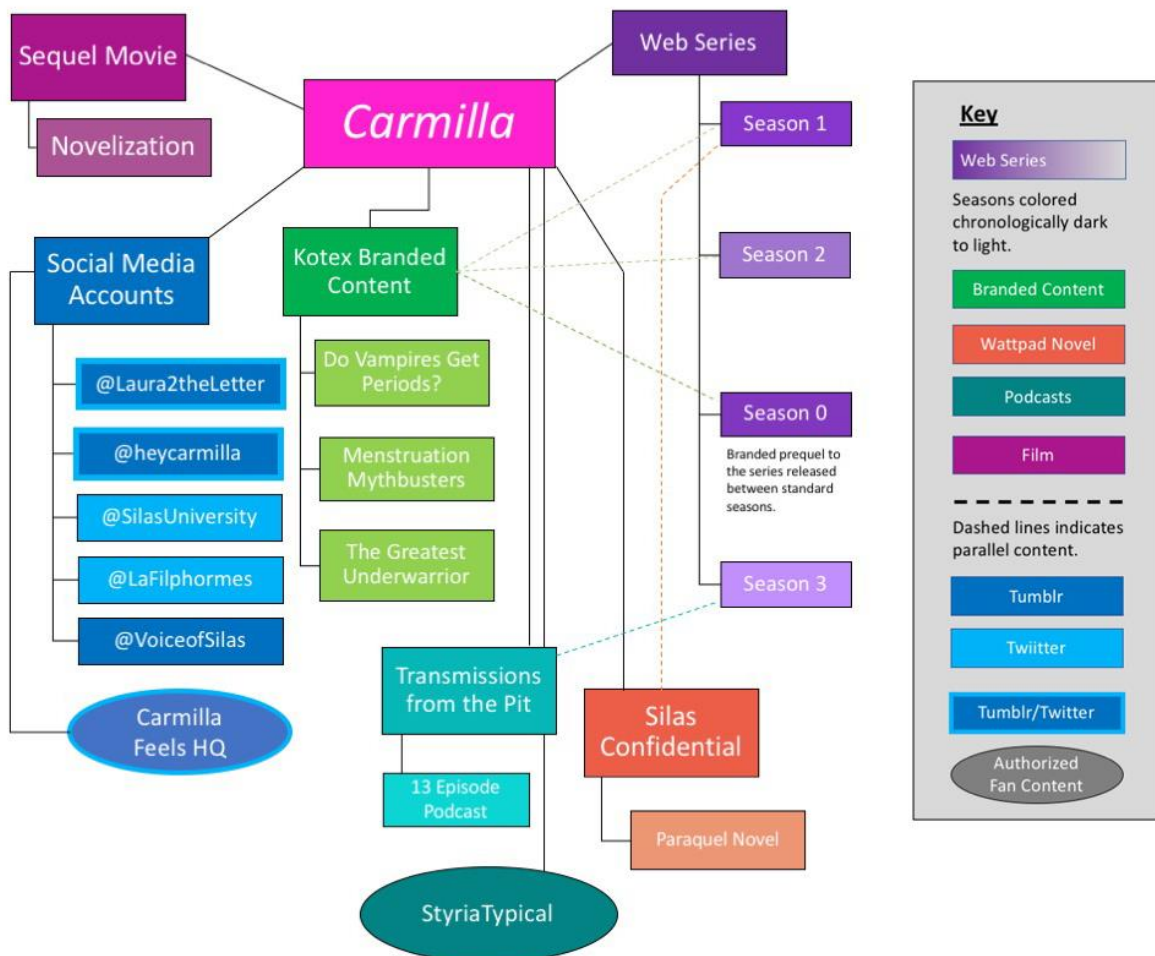


Figure 4.1 Transmedia map and key of the *Carmilla* world.

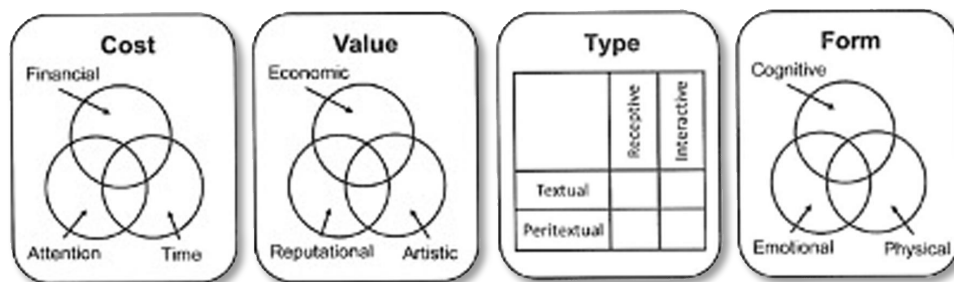
### 4.1 Intertextual Play: In the Space Between

*Carmilla* uses transmedia storytelling and participatory world building to create its "web" world. Transmedia storytelling or world building is a story or world in which audiences must navigate multiple mediums and formats to collect information regarding narrative, characters, and world mechanics (Jenkins, 2006, 21). For most traditional transmedia stories, the only play allowed for audience is one of discovery, connecting various media texts together. However,

with queer intertextual commodities audience-players also enjoy the pleasure of creation, as they contribute through social media and other means to the canon transmedia texts.

The *Carmilla* world incorporates several canonical texts including the web series, social media accounts, a paraquel novel, in-world promotional materials, a prequel series, a film, and novel. The series has also incorporated a paraquel with *Silas Confidential*, a blog authored on Wattpad by "Mary," Laura's across-the-hallway neighbor.<sup>20</sup> The series uses a variety of locations for interaction including YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Wattpad, and VHX.TV to distribute content and interact with viewer-participants.

Elizabeth Evans (2020) in *Understanding Engagement in Transmedia Culture* provides an in-depth analysis of how creatives and audiences understand the way engagement works within transmedia storytelling. Here Evans creates rubrics to better understand transmedia creation including type (of behavior), form (of response), cost (to audiences) and value (to producer) (Evans, 2020, p. 36-37).



**Figure 4.2** Diagrams of transmedia production from Elizabeth Evans (2020, p. 38).

Examining *Carmilla*'s transmedia network we can see that the project uses both receptive and interactive mediums as well as textual and peritextual elements in its design (type). It requires audiences to primarily rely on emotion but includes some cognitive labor as well (form). It cost

<sup>20</sup> A paraquel is a story that takes place simultaneously from the main story from another character's point-of-view, generally to provide a different perspective of the same series of events (Wolf 210).

audiences little financially but requires time and attention (cost). But provides production value economically through their sponsor and fan donations, as well as artistic license (through social media feeds) and improved reputation through industry awards (value).

However, Evans discovered that audiences view engagement in transmedia storytelling differently from those who produce it. Evans (2020) reports “The majority of practitioners positioned different media as creating unique engagement experiences, audiences predominately saw parallels and connections between their experiences of different media” (p. 33). This difference is essential to understanding the importance of play, agency, and interactivity in the queer intertextual commodity. For fans who participated in Evans study, “Engagement emerged as more inherently transmedia, as existing above and across individual media forms rather than tied to each individually” (Evans, 2020, p. 29). The play is between mediums in the webbing between the text—the pleasure is in discovery, and in the case of queer intertextual commodities, of creation.

Audiences have the ability to explore, interact, and contribute towards the extension of canonical world by playing in the intertextual commodity web. In the previous section, I’ve presented extensive evidence on the way’s fans contribute through canonical social media interactions. Fans also have the ability to dig around the transmedia world. As one survey respondent put it, “If someone builds me a sandbox, I gotta get in there with a shovel.” Fans are able to curate their level of engagement with the text and make the decision on whether they will stick to canonical sources or enter purely fannish regions of fanfiction. It’s important to note that production has encouraged parallel storytelling with the Wattpad novel *Silas Confidential* in season one.<sup>21</sup> This paraquel novel presents the happenings at Silas from the point of view of

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<sup>21</sup> Wattpad is a social storytelling platform with over 90 million users. The site is designed to help young authors create new original works (not fan fiction) or licensed content like *Silas Confidential*.

Laura's across-the-hall neighbor. Wattpad allows the integration of episodes to appear alongside the paraquel chapters, providing two viewpoints on the same events. Additionally, it allows the audience to comment in-line with the text and for the author/narrator (or other readers) to respond in the margins. Providing another opportunity to play and create alongside canon and even influencing it.

Fans have taken up this idea of parallel storytelling with social media accounts for inanimate objects in the *Carmilla* world. Accounts include Carmilla's Pants, Laura's Tardis Mug, and Carmilla's Motorcycle, among others. Accounts can be found on both Twitter and Tumblr. The most notable example is the fan-created Twitter account @Lauraspillow, which has over 2,000 followers.



**Figure 4.3** Example of a post by @LaurasPillow on Twitter.

Each account blogs from the object's viewpoint of what is going on in the story, often adding emotive layers to the story. Though the object accounts are not part of the canon of *Carmilla*, they are part of the intertextual web at play.

Though the object accounts never became canon intertext, other fan created accounts did become canonized. Silas University like any university has various campus student organizations, some are mentioned in the web series and other transmedia elements like the Summer Society and Zeta Omega Mu (a Greek sorority and fraternity respectively), others are interest-based like *The Voice of Silas* (student newspaper), Silas Faculty Club, and The Alchemy

Club. Along with fan-created clubs like the Silas Swim Team, Astronomy Club, Silas Coven, Shoofly Club, Martial Arts Club, and the Silas Glee Club.

Though many clubs were created by fans via social media feeds, only a few of these groups gained traction within fan discourse. The Silas Glee Club being one of the most influential. Fans created 8 Tracks playlists of songs the glee club performed, a club social group (private chatroom) on AminoApps, it was included as an option in the popular Silas Sorting Quiz, and fans created a variety of club logos.



**Figure 4.4** 8Tracks Cover by Bookishrealms; **Figure 4.5** Original Image from the Amino Group; **Figure 4.6** Poster by Luiza2the letter.

Silas Glee Club members created various playlists on YouTube featuring queer female artists. In season three of the series, the Silas Glee Club finally became part of canon with production adding their own list to the mix and incorporating a black and white version of the Luiza's art (above) as part of official merchandise (more on this in alternative financing below). Fans can extend the story world through means other than social media interactions but are still intertextual play.

Audience members also add to the extra-diegetic paratexts through fan sites, podcasts, and even fan conventions. In the transmedia map at the start of this chapter, you see the extensive world of *Carmilla* that incorporates both creative production-initiated

content/interactions (rectangles), and fan-created content that has become “un-officially official” by production (ovals). Two important examples are provided here: *Carmilla Feels HQ* (social media hub), and *StyriaTypical* (podcast). Each of these fan texts are technically not official production elements, as they are created and run by fans. However, in my interviews with creative staff and these fan creators I discovered that though they are not official they are considered essential to the continued success of the series. They are not official because they are not works-for-hire, and therefore not sanctioned by Shaftesbury Entertainment. However, Ellen Simpson and Jordan Hall both name-checked the work of these fans as doing essential promotional work. Though it is possible to consider the quasi-official status of these paratextual elements to be an act of “regifting” by production, it is in fact the start of an ethical hybrid economy as production equally cites these fan works and even provided opportunity for financial remuneration after the fact (Scott, 2009).

*Carmilla Feels HQ* is run by a fan out of Scotland.<sup>22</sup> She started the Tumblr account to create a repository for all *Carmilla* related content, linking up all of the various transmedia elements into one central hub. She also re-blogged all of the official production accounts information there, collecting all canon and paratextual content in the same place. Later she created a Twitter account using the same moniker. For fans, these hubs created a much-needed navigational starting point to explore the transmedia world. A door not provided by production. The Twitter account has over 10,000 followers, and posts on her Tumblr account consistently gets over 1000 “notes” (fave, comments or reblogs). Interestingly, during season two, Ellen Simpson, the social media coordinator for the series, reached out and hired the woman behind *Carmilla Feels HQ* to help manage the social media content, as it was now too much for one

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<sup>22</sup> Who prefers to be anonymous for professional reasons as her work as a fan could hurt her professional career.



person. Though her fan work is not considered canon by production it *is* considered part of the transmedia world.

*StyriaTypical* is a fan podcast by Belinda & Angie (#Bangie). Their podcast started as a re-watch commentary and grew to include interviews with cast members and the creative team. When they reached 300 followers, Jordan Hall did a shout out and over-night their followers skyrocketed. As fans, they feel very strongly that they are part of the gift economy and refuse payment from other fans or production for the promotional work they do for *Carmilla* or other fans (particularly fanfiction). In an interview with the hosts of *StyriaTypical*, Belinda stated “*Carmilla* is a show that needed to acknowledge their fans as a survival tactic,” whereas Angie stated “Fans are doing marketing and promotion for them. Shows are beginning to recognize that fans do a lot of leg-work for them, and to appreciate that [labor]” (Angie & Belinda, personal communication, 2019). At ClexaCon 2019 *StyriaTypical* recorded several episodes live, including an interview with Kim Turrisi the author of *Carmilla: The Novel* (film novelization), and a live broadcast of an audience choose-your-own-adventure fanfiction episode.

The intertextual play in the transmedia storytelling of the QIC allows not only for discovery, but creation. Sometimes through outlets not envisioned by the content creators. Production’s desire to include fans in the creative process as both promotion/marketing and as invested collaborator is essential for the give and take of these types of ventures. *Carmilla* had to address issues of corporate ownership/sponsorship of the web series and the independent but connected transmedia elements like the social media feeds, novels, movie, and podcasts. The hierarchical nature of corporate transmedia as described by Henry Jenkins (2006) in *Convergence Culture*, while maintained at the core of the intertextual commodity as discovery-play consistent with participatory culture becomes less structured and more organic as the queer

intertextual commodity grows and becomes more porous allowing for audience-players to contribute to the text.

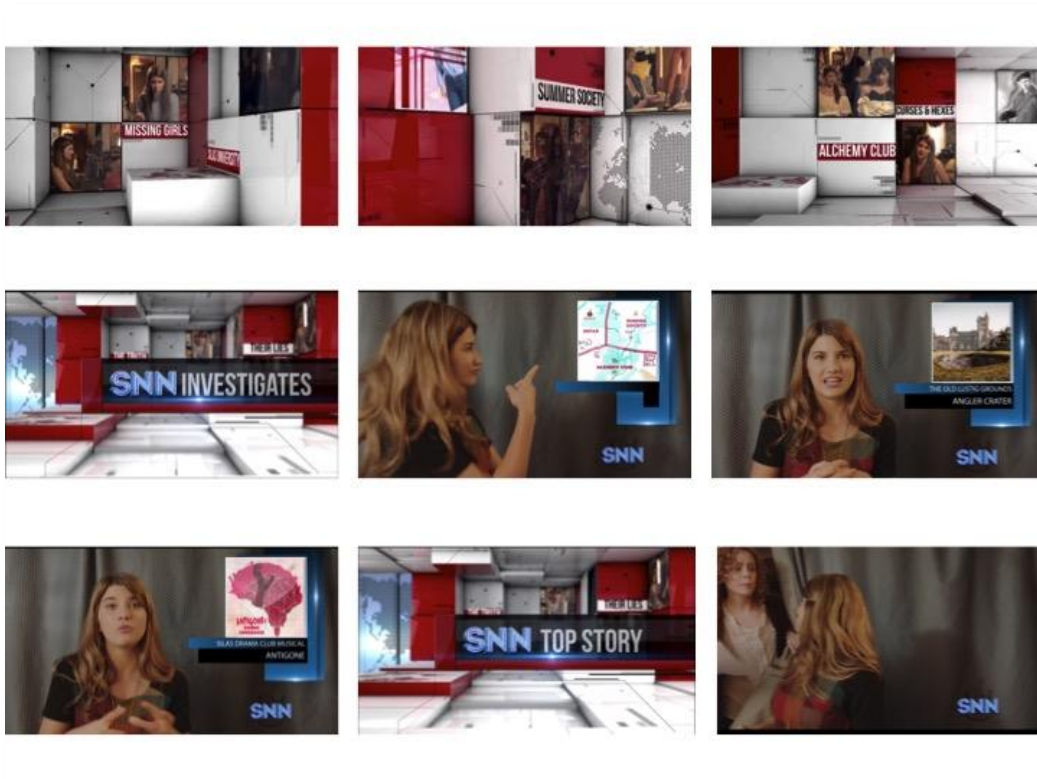
#### **4.2 Remediation: The Fantastical & the Mundane**

By framing *Carmilla* as a personal vlog and homework assignment for Silas student, Laura Hollis, the entire web series is based on an aesthetic foundation of remediation. According to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) remediating aesthetics is supposed to render new formats, mediums and technologies more understandable to users/audiences by reusing old aesthetics and iconography (p. 55-62). However, the web series others the text using aesthetics that incorporate visual markers of vlogs, news composites, Skype-like interfaces, security footage, and even VHS static, making the fantastical, eccentric, and odd merely mundane. For example, the base aesthetic of the series is that of the vlog, which has aesthetic markers including a static desk level camera, limited mise-en-scène, and rough editing style, all established in the premiere episode "Disorientation." The vlog aesthetic creates a level of authenticity and intimacy with the viewing audience. Laura's physical proximity to the web camera and consistent location of her dorm room provide the audience with an intimate portrait of her life. The "homemade" aesthetic markers highlighted by Glen Creeber (2011) in vlog and web series aesthetics mix with straight-faced performance (p. 598). The blasé performance of such phrases as "the homecoming goat sacrifice" and "activate the nearest blue tentacle phone" ("Disorientation" and "Missing") invoke an intimate connection to a fantastical world.

Since the webcam can only show that which is in its immediate view, Laura pulls in static images from her research around campus into her vlog. These pictures provide visual points of references for the audience, as well as variety in what is a static and limited format. As early as the first episode, Laura includes historical photos of Silas campus in her paranormal exposé.

As the first season progresses, she includes surveillance images of Carmilla at parties. Introduced with news reporter flare, including hand gestures that sync up with the motion graphic manipulation of the image on screen—movement of the photo from center to top left, and later cropping in for detail ("Evidence").

In season two, these motion graphics become sophisticated prosumer quality news intros that include multiple inserts and planes of motion, typical of CNN. In fact, the vlog temporarily rebrands itself to SNN (Silas New Network) including corner logo, jingle, and breaking reports. Though this whole-hearted embracing of news aesthetics is limited and temporary; it does point towards the overall remediation of news aesthetic into the vlog and show.

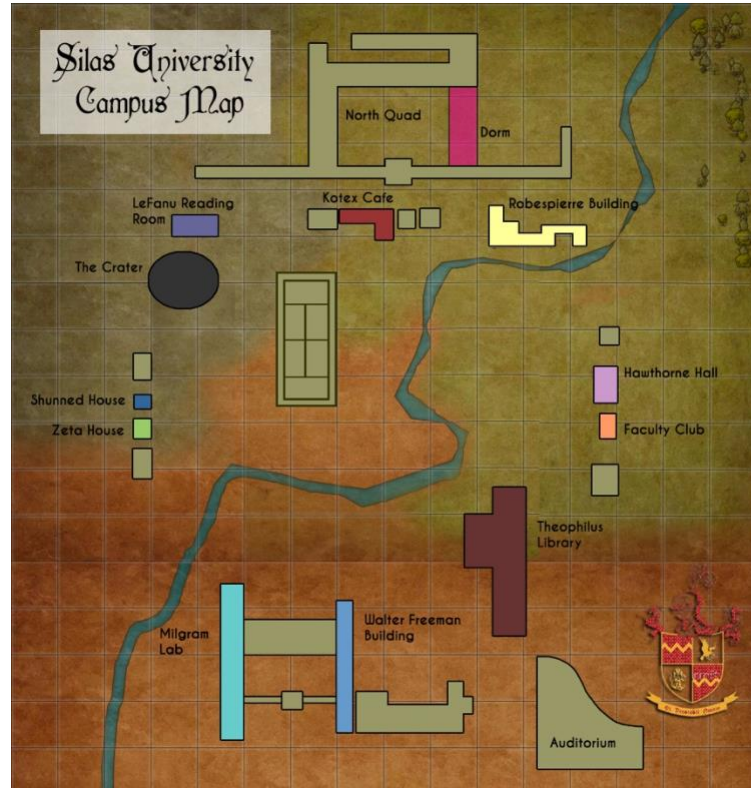


*Figure 4.7 Series of screenshots from episode “SNN” (2.3).*

Here we see Laura and her friends take over running the news system at Silas when all the members of the school newspaper, *The Voice of Silas* are discovered dead. They convert Laura's investigational journalism vlog into the Silas News Network. They begin their broadcast with a "weather report" of sorts that outlines the current territory dispute going on between the Summer Society (a sorority), the Zetas (a fraternity), and the Alchemy Club over who controls what part of the campus. Laura remarks that there is an "exploding fungal conflict" on the Zeta/Alchemy boarder. She also warns students away from the anglerfish crater, asking them to "Please stop throwing cherry bombs at the fish. It's all fun and games until a primordial monster gets loose and devours us all" ("SNN"). The mixture of remediated news-style content and matter-of-fact presentation of the rather bizarre events of Silas University create a queer space that others the aesthetics and familiar technologies presented in the show. Remediation when used as a queer aesthetic, requires the audience to evaluate the familiar in a new light, not because of the characters and their respective LGBT+ identities, but due to fantastical and otherworldly happenings in a mundane setting—a format and genre that should be familiar, but isn't.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For more information about remediation as a queer aesthetic see chapter 5.



**Figure 4.8** Fan created map of Silas University created from footage in “SNN.”

Fans have used this episode and other transmedia and paratextual content to create a map of Silas University in an attempt to better understand the space of the show, as it is never seen—only described after the fact. Additionally, fans have created soundscapes using ambient mixers for various locations on campus like the library and dorms, and for events that happened off-camera mainly conflicts in the Crater and the North Quad. These and many other fan works are featured on *Carmilla Feels HQ* and by production, bringing them into the intertextual world. Fans leverage the gap created by the remediated aesthetic and single-fixed camera set-up to fill in the gaps of the text. Alleviating concerns that transmedia content and intertextual worlds could eliminate the spaces for fan conjuncture and head canon as voiced by Suzanne Scott (2010) in “The Trouble with Transmediation.”

### 4.3 Navigating the “Quad:” Sponsorship, Brand, Parody & Censorship

#### 4.3.1 *The Lay of the Land: Industrial Background*

*Carmilla* began as a single-sponsor branded entertainment venture in conjunction with Shaftesbury, Smokebomb Entertainment, and Shift2 in 2014. The main storyline of the series does not include brand integration. Instead, transmedia content adjacent to the main storyline uses product placement as part of their humor and appeal. According to Ellen Simpson, the sponsor brand, U by Kotex, was specifically looking to attract 13-17 year-old (queer) girls to the brand (personal communication, April 12, 2019), though a Shift2 representative is quoted in a news article that the target demographic was 18-24 queer women (Clarke, 2016). The focus on the young teen girl demographic is particularly necessary for the feminine hygiene market as most women select products at the onset of their menses and remain loyal to that brand till menopause (often passing on that brand preference to their daughters). There have been no previous feminine hygiene marketing campaigns specifically targeting queer women.<sup>24</sup> The success of the series both as a representational content and as a niche marketing campaign is monumental as it proves that “niche content can reach a worldwide market” both artistically and commercially (Whitney-Vernon, 2014).<sup>25</sup>

The Canadian production was non-union in its first year to reduce costs and worked with Canadian *VerveGirl* magazine’s YouTube channel for distribution (to coincide with the magazine’s print campaign for U by Kotex). The following year the series converted to an ACTRA union shoot. In 2016 the success of *Carmilla* initiated a rebrand of the YouTube

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<sup>24</sup> Specifically, no traditional feminine hygiene product like tampons or pads have targeted queer women. Alternative products like the cups and underwear have certainly target adult (18+) queer women, but not the queer youth demographic (10-18).

<sup>25</sup> According to the research study funded by Kotex by Fresh Intelligence, 31% of *Carmilla*’s viewers reported buying U by Kotex because it sponsored the show, and 93% of viewers knew that Kotex sponsored the content (Shields, 2016).

channel to KindaTV, removing the link between the magazine and the web series distribution. KindaTV's spokeswoman is Natasha Negovanlis, the actress who plays Carmilla. The channel provides “the kinda representation you just don't see on TV” including narrative series like *All4One*, *Carmilla*, *Barbelle* and paratextual content that is “whimsical, honest and empowering—featuring the cast of our series” (*KindaTV - YouTube*).

The sponsorship deal with Kotex covered only the costs of the web series production. Though the social media integration was always part of the pitch to the sponsor as an increase in the brand's “impressions” on the audience (J. Hall, personal communication, May 13, 2019), Kotex did not cover the costs and had no censorship control over the social media feeds (E. Simpson, personal communication, April 12, 2019). The social media accounts were primarily funded by fan micropatronage, as such, the narrative extensions and the interactions with fans were untouched by the corporate sponsor. Though U by Kotex social media accounts occasionally comment on character accounts, they do so in the same way that any fan might.

The series ended in 2016 as did its partnership with sponsor Kotex, however, the world of *Carmilla* continues on with a grant and crowdfunded sequel film in 2017, and novelization by Kim Turrisi. The series has such a devout following that in October 2019, the first ever CarmillaCon was held in Toronto. Additionally, fans keep the series alive through a variety of other means, including weekly giveaways, the *StyriaTypical* podcast, and object-based social media accounts (like Carmilla's pants or Laura's pillow). Recently, the series has been optioned for a television series.

#### **4.3.2 Branded Entertainment: Reuse, Recycle, Remediate**

Single sponsorship and branded entertainment are business models from television's early era. Both faded from the industrial mix in favor of commercial ad blocks and product

placement in the 1950s. The change allowed more creative freedom for content creators who no longer had to cater to a single financial stream's whims, and from the investor perspective it shared and therefore reduced the risk among several investors. However, with online media we see the re-use and remediation of these old tactics in a variety of ways. *Carmilla* remediates these old business tactics by using a satirical branded narrative, and quirky alternative-use product placement of the single-sponsor brand, U by Kotex.

*Carmilla* addresses the queering or othering of commodification in a couple of ways, not the least of which is the meta-interactions between sponsor brand, characters, and audience. However, it also uses branded companion segments, a branded prequel season that uses heavy product placement, and even a limited edition *Carmilla* cross-branded U by Kotex tampon pack to leverage capital from the program. Queerness is a “mass culture reception practice that is shared by all sorts of people in varying degrees of consistency and intensity” (Doty, 1993, p. 2). Though these methods can certainly be problematic, especially in light of fan labor and identity in a co-authored text like *Carmilla*, the use of satire and parody provide the ability to critique, other, and ultimately reduce the negative impact of commodification in a post-millennial queer text.

Parody and satire have long been a marker of authenticity in media, a way of providing bona fides to counterculture or subcultural groups. Within the LGBTQ+ community, the over the top gender performances of drag have a foundation in parody that is an essential marker of authenticity (Tinkcom, 2002, p. 5). Parody and satire are often implemented when using brand integration and product placement as a means to mitigate the stigma of overt commercialism—a means of negotiating fan understandings of “selling out” to corporate needs (Gray, 2006, p.



93).<sup>26</sup> In *Carmilla* the use of satire is an attempt to brand authenticity not only for *Carmilla*, but also its sponsor brand, Kotex. Branding authenticity is two-fold, it is the use of satirical irreverence to negotiate the politics of brand integration, but it is also the creation of a new brand culture around *Carmilla* and KindaTV that is understood as authentic by viewers (which Kotex hopes to benefit from by association). Janet Banet-Weiser (2012) in her work *Authentic™The Politics of Ambivalence in Brand Culture* argues “This transformation of culture of everyday living into brand culture signals a broader shift, from ‘authentic’ culture to the branding of authenticity” (p. 5). In the case of *Carmilla* branding authenticity is in presenting, within the text itself and the series production, methods of negotiating capitalist culture for and by queer people. By bringing in LGBTQ+ individuals for key creative roles and a predominately queer cast, production is able to negotiate capitalist structures and hierarchies to comment on them through parody and satire within the web series proper, branded companion shows, and Season Zero’s product placement use. Focusing on destigmatizing menstruation through humor and addressing the “pink tax.” Unable to exist outside late capitalism, it is important to understand the ways in which brand culture and brands more generally are used as tools of oppression and of revolution.

#### **4.3.2.1 Parody PSAs & Companion Programming**

Companion shows are generally non-diegetic. However, *Carmilla*’s companion programming is firmly established as part of the world of Silas University with the characters as themselves presenting the branded entertainment segments to the audience. Branded entertainment "offers advertisers the advantage of working in collaboration [with content creators] to benefit products and brands, without however seeking to systematically highlight

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<sup>26</sup> Examples of this include the product placement segment in *Wayne’s World* (1992) or the long-running series *The Simpsons* (1989-) has countless examples including VW Beetle, Butterfinger, Miller, Mountain Dew, Arby’s etc.

them" (Lehu, 2009, p. 213). The companion episodes are secondary vlogs in the Silas University world, where characters cover campus events like "The Greatest Underwarrior;" create public service announcements "Menstruation Mythbusters;" and question and answer sessions like "Do Vampires Get Periods?" Silas Campus Health Services and the web series sponsor brand, U by Kotex, co-sponsor these segments. These short spotlight episodes use satire to other the commodification of the text by the sponsor brand while also continuing to fulfill the obligations of sponsorship.

The style of these parody PSAs and gameshows are based on the phenomenon of culture jamming described by Naomi Klein (2009) in *No Logo* as "the practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their messages" (p. 280). The most sophisticated examples of culture jamming use the corporation's own language of communication—visual and written rhetoric—against it (Klein, 2009, p. 281). However, what happens when the aesthetics of culture jamming are itself hacked? It becomes what Banet-Weiser calls commodity activism—a more give/take negotiation of the commercial experience, described below.

Commodity activism takes shape within the logic and language of branding and is a compelling example of the ambivalence that structures brand culture. This kind of activism not only illustrates the contradictions, contingencies, and paradoxes shaping consumer capital today but also exemplifies the connections—sometimes smooth, sometimes contradictory—between merchandising, political ideologies, and consumer citizenship. (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 17)

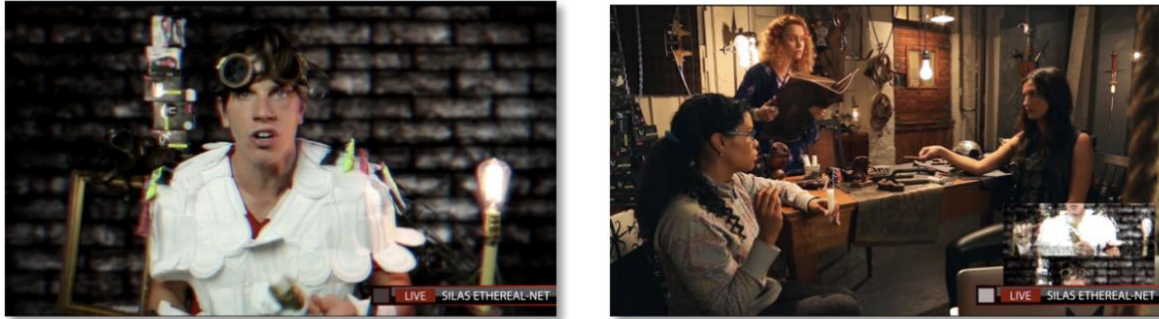
By remediating the aesthetics of quiz shows, PSA, and talk TV, these segments create a parody of all their respective media content, while satirizing the inherent commodification of media, and subsequent audiences. Additionally, the use of satire to queer or other commodification also renders menstruation a mundane rather than a taboo topic, with a potentially positive effect

on female viewers and the sponsorship brand alike (Steimer, 2017). These tactics never lose sight of their position within capitalism, even as it negotiates commercial structures for both public (representation, public health) and private (Kotex's corporate) good.

#### **4.3.2.2 *Season Zero: Brand Integration***

With season two complete, the sponsor brand has developed a new approach to branded entertainment and the *Carmilla* world, labeled Season Zero. This season was an experiment by the show's creators and the sponsor brand Kotex to have a more definitive integration between the brand, subsequent product placement, and the narrative of the web series. As such, Kotex was more hands-on in the production compared to the main *Carmilla* storyline. Ellen Simpson was the writer for this experiment and after several round of notes the original script was rejected only 48-hours before shooting was to begin. The season was re-written with a narrative featuring the mystery of "the great red wing migration" at Silas University when all menstruation on campus stops. According to Ellen, it was "a product of quality in the time given to produce it" (E. Simpson, personal communication, April 12, 2019). *Carmilla's* "Season Zero" is a branded entertainment prequel season of *Carmilla* that aired between the second and third season. Season Zero presents a discrete storyline prior to Laura Hollis's freshman year on campus when the main storyline begins. It is the only season to include the brand directly in the main storyline.

This short form series has an ongoing plotline that is a divergent prequel path from the main narrative, told in a remediated format similar to the main text via VHS recordings of surveillance tapes with visual markers like static, grain, and night vision. With Season Zero, the branded entertainment is through diegetic, if untraditional, use of the sponsor brand product.



**Figure 4.9** Kirsch in Kotex armor in “No One Expects” (0.4).

Kirsch creates armor from clean, unused sanitary pads (“No One Expects”), and the storyline features mass missing periods, or “the great red-wing migration” (“Blast from the Past”), thus “normalizing” the reoccurring visuality of the brand in space not previously branded. Merging the branded entertainment component with the central transmedia story element is an attempt to “quantify desire, measure connections, and to commodify commitment—and perhaps most importantly of all, the need to transform all of the above into return on investment,” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 62). The othering created by the branded entertainment move to the main story continues to use satire as established in previous segments. The integration of more overt product placement (among other factors) left the post-millennial queer audience keenly aware of their exploitation.

Brand integration or commercial tie-ins are highly visible with 77% of survey respondents report noticing these practices, and roughly half of participants (52%) believe that these marketing efforts are effective. However, when asked if they resented the brand integration 39% of respondents answered affirmatively, and 45% felt that they were being exploited. Fans of *Carmilla* have reacted negatively to the branded entertainment of Season Zero, especially as it has no interactivity for fans to build onto the text, to continue to queer or other the commodification inherent in the season. Instead, fans discuss the relative merits of watching Season Zero for the sole purpose of hoping the sponsor will continue the previous story-arc (or

marketing campaign) for season three when the transmedia story and world building will also continue.

A fan conversation on the Tumblr blog, *Carmilla Feels HQ*, includes the argument that "At the end of the day they [Kotex] are still a business, and businesses don't invest money into a marketing campaign that doesn't demonstrate a valuable return, no matter how worthwhile that thing may be" (*Thank You for Reblogging*, 2015). This fan is arguing, on a relatively large platform, that essentially Season Zero is the cost of having the previous and future seasons of the series. This is a common practice for minority fans, who are used to supporting problematic representation in favor of having no representation whatsoever. Kristen Warner (2015) has written about black women's fandom existing in "activist mode" and the burden felt by fans to ensure that there will continue to be a market for them. Therefore, fans have already come to realize that they are "allowing advertisers to tap the power of collective intelligence and direct it toward their own ends, but at the same time allowing consumers to form their own kind of collective bargaining structure," (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 63). That is to say, that some audiences recognize their appropriation within the film world and acknowledge and can even consent or reject their exploitation through fan commentary, and even boycott of the branded episodes. Some audiences even embrace the branded content and lament the attitude of viewers who see the season as a "chore." Regardless of their positions individually, clearly fans are aware of their potential exploitation and weigh the cost for themselves.

What is particularly interesting in regards to the *Carmilla* audience and world-building experience is that the viewer has the agency to act from within the diegesis and from outside the story world simultaneously, by participating in the canonical transmedia worldbuilding in addition to fan conversation and critique. Unlike previous transmedia or intertextual

commodities where audiences only had agency outside of the canonical text through connecting textual elements or paratextual feedback loops, the queer intertextual commodity allows the audience the additional agency to contribute towards canon and the *continued control* over their contributions. Fans are able to edit and delete their contributions at any time. Additionally, audiences are cognizant of their appropriation into the story world and exploitation in the real world and navigate these issues by manipulating the boundaries between the imaginary world and the world of reality through purposeful viewership and social media feedback loops. Ultimately, *Carmilla* has been renewed by its sponsor brand for a third season, and it will not be branded entertainment like the Season Zero experiment. Instead, U by Kotex will continue the short form companion segments and meta-interactions from previous seasons. *Carmilla*'s audience-creative interaction embodies the participatory give and take, integral to millennial queerness. By contributing to the critique of Season Zero alongside viewership support, the fan community displays a sophisticated understanding of the ways in which commodification uses texts and identity to sell products.

#### **4.4 Alternative Finance: Gifting, Regifting & Canon**

##### ***4.4.1 Micropatronage: Fan Sponsorship and the Gift Economy***

Micropatronage is the one time or ongoing financial support of an artist or their work. When used in a queer intertextual commodity, micropatronage allows audience members to become individual sponsors of media content freeing creative projects from corporate control and becoming stakeholder in the project. Artists of any medium can set up accounts at sites like Patreon, Buy Me a Coffee, and Ulele to allow their fans to economically express their appreciation. Unlike traditional crowdfunding there may or may not be incentives for fans who support an artist, and there is no end goal or financial bar to be met. In the case of *Carmilla*,

micropatronage was an additional funding source for the series non-branded ancillary content—most notably the social media accounts on Twitter and Tumblr (and also the Wattpad novel). With fans financially supporting these accounts, a level of control by the sponsor brand, U by Kotex, was mitigated—allowing for a more organic interaction between fans and characters. According to Ellen Simpson in her interview with me, this fan-funding allowed her to bring the fan responsible for Carmilla Feels HQ onboard as a social media content specialist for the @carmillaseries accounts on Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube. This allowed her to spend more time and resources on the character accounts and interactions with fans. Fans were directly supporting creative production and not the sponsor brand. As opposed to purchasing U by Kotex’s *Carmilla* cross-branded fan-designed tampon packaging, a clear act of “re-gifting” by the sponsor brand (Scott, 2009).



**Figure 4.10** Image from the Amazon page selling the limited-edition box featuring “Hollistein packaging designed by fellow Creampuff, Trixie Mahayag.”

According to survey data, over half (61%) of post-millennial queer audiences actively follow fan-funded projects and 41% have contributed funds to a project through micropatronage services. The *Carmilla* sequel film crowdfunding campaign included access to the end product at the base level, with additional incentives included as pledges increased including behind-the-scenes content, promotional merchandise, physical DVDs, autographs, and actor interactions.

Regardless of the amount pledged (minimum support \$10) all participants crowdfunding the film had access to the art they were sponsoring. *The Carmilla Movie* was unlike other previous film crowdfunding campaigns like the *Veronica Mars* movie, which required audiences to fund the film, pay to see it in the theater, and hopefully by a DVD. The *Carmilla* sequel saw audiences not as an asset to be exploited for additional funding (or proof of box office), but a funding partner, who like artist sponsor of old would have access to the content created on their behalf.

#### **4.4.2 Making Fan-Made Merch Official: Silas Glee Club**

Fan-made merchandise is not a new phenomenon. According to Avi Santo (2017) it is the “stuff made by fans and sold to fans as authentic expressions of fannishness” (p. 333). Found in fan-based commercial spaces like convention artist alleys, Etsy, Redbubble, Spoonflower, and in thousands of independent websites across the globe. These fandom-based cottage businesses sell fan art, t-shirts, comics, filk CDs, zines, jewelry, plushies, fabric, clothes & costumes and so much more. I define fan-made merchandise as for-sale content (material or digital) created by fans that was unsolicited by the IP owner in its creation. As opposed to content created and given freely by fans as part of the “gift economy” or content created for-hire in a traditional manner (Cheal, 1988).

Generally, fan-made merchandise is part of the grey or parallel market as they are goods sold outside the authorized distribution channels by entities (fans) which have no legal relationship with the IP-rights owner. Lawrence Lessig (2008) first stated audiences creating “folk art” as being grey market activity in *Remix*. Modern folk art is fan art, and that art is for sale. Though fan-made merchandise is not technically illegal it is limited. To remain on this side of legal, fanworks for sale must not use a trademarked logo or image, it must not directly copy another’s design (knocking-off), and it must not reproduce (in full or in part) a copyrighted work.



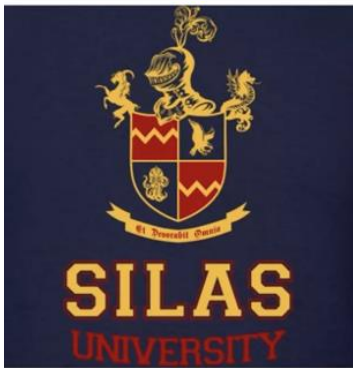
As most fanworks are reimagining's or artistic interpretation of fictional characters, they are not technically illegal to sell, but they are in a legal grey zone if they directly reference the original (Clay & Phillips, 2015).

The categorization of fan artist or fan creator is not a designation based on amateur or professional status, level of training, or financial position, but is instead based on a mode of production—a mode based on intent. There is a long history of fans as creators within the gift, commercial (re-gift), and hybrid economies (Cheal, 1988; Lessig, 2008; Scott, 2009). As there are many terms for these fans themselves—"producers" and "fan-trepreneurs" being the most academically significant (Bruns, 2008; Scott, 2014). Regardless of the terminology used these are fans capitalizing on fandom as a business. Many of the fan artists whose work becomes officially licensed are trained in graphic design, traditional fine art, and illustration like Grace Kooker (BigMamaLlama5) and Valentine M. Smith; while others like Luixa2theletter and Niestein are not. However, it does not make their art any less fanworks, as I am not defining fan artists/creators by professional/amateur status, but rather about commissioned or contract-based work versus work created for the love of the thing, unsolicited by production.

Historically, mainstream media gains value from fan works, as these works are a type of unpaid promotion (Johnson, 2014; Scott, 2014; Stanfill, 2017; Thompson, 2007). However, major media franchises do not need fan-made merchandise or art to turn a profit, as they have healthy promotional budgets from their studios. Whereas, indie media projects rely heavily on fan labor to survive, particularly in promotion and merchandising. However, it has largely relied solely on the gift economy of fandom, providing very little in terms of reciprocity with the audience that provides not only the demand but the labor. However, where the QIC differs is in that it provides reciprocity for audience labor through citation and financial remuneration as

discussed earlier. Fans are given credit for the work they do and whenever possible they are financially rewarded, whether through a cut of the profits, a one-time fee, or being hired as an employee.

Almost all of *Carmilla*'s official merchandise is fan-designed with a few notable exceptions, anything with the *Carmilla* logo, the Creampuffs hat (designed by Natasha Negovanlis, aka Carmilla herself), the season three promo shirt, and *Voice of Silas* newspaper logo (a work-for-hire for season two). The remaining seven designs are created by fans before becoming official merchandise.



by Grace Kookan



by Valentine M Smith



by Niestein



by Grace Kookan



by Unknown



by Unknown



by Luiza2theletter

**Figure 4.11** Fan-made designs found in the *Carmilla* official fan merch store.

Of those seven designs, five of those designs have citation to the fan designers. However, the remaining two have no citation, but were widely circulated online prior to becoming official merchandise. However, this failure of citation is an indicator not of indifference to fans, but a lack of organization around official merchandise generally. The *Carmilla* production has issued no general statements regarding fan-made merchandise, either for or against. Leaving the grey market to create alongside the content they pull into the official store. Further, they have no record of issuing cease and desist orders to fan creators, implying fans are free to create.

*Carmilla* heavily relies on fans creating their own merch and actively encourages it by incorporating fan works into canon through a variety of means including official merchandise. As previously mentioned, fans created the Silas Glee Club as a group devoted to promoting queer musical artists on a variety of platforms including 8tracks, YouTube, and Amino. A variety of logos were designed by fans for the club, one of which became official merchandise—pulling a fan-created “campus organization” into the world of Silas University in an official capacity. Citation provides a variety of rewards for fan artists that are sanctioned by production, including the general affective rewards of fandom, the authorial credit on the official website/social media feeds, and the promotion of the fan artist and their work. In many ways the

incorporation of fan art as official merchandise is reinforcing the value of “aspirational labor,” which is often exploitative (Scott, 2014; Stanfill, 2019a). However, in addition to citation as a method of recognition, queer intertextual commodities like *Carmilla* also provide capital to fan artists.

The capital structures used to sanction these fan works as official provide financial remuneration to the artists. Becoming official fan-made merchandise generally utilizes two traditional financial structures, the first is related to reproduction rights and the second is a split of proceeds. In the first, the production pays the artists a one-time fee or on-going payment for the use of reproduction rights. In the later, a contract is negotiated where each party (the artist and the original IP owner) agree to a profit percentage split per each item sold. Regardless of the structure the production company carries the financial burden of creating physical merchandise. Though I wasn’t able to speak with all of the artists associated with *Carmilla* and no one was willing to share the specifics of their contracts, I was able to determine that the majority of the official fan-made merchandise used a licensing of reproduction rights.<sup>27</sup> Legally this is a fan-artist licensing their artwork with production by entering into a limited rights of reproduction agreement. In addition to the financial return and legal protection sanctioning fan-made merchandise as official contributes toward the professionalization or the perceived professionalization of these fan artists.

#### **4.5 Concluding Carmilla**

In this case study of *Carmilla* we have explored the many ways in which audiences and creatives collaborate to extend world-building and negotiate the underlying capital culture of

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<sup>27</sup> Of the seven fan artists featured in the official *Carmilla* merchandise shop, I was able to speak with three artists and with a member of production working with sales.

which we are all part. In the previous chapter we investigated social media interactions and self-representation as forms of co-creation. In this chapter we examine the ways creatives and audiences employ intertextual play—allowing for fandom paratextual content to become included in canonical creation. We also examined the ways in which production used remediation as a queer aesthetic allowing for a gap in the QIC that corporate or traditional transmedia storytelling shores up, thus allowing the audience to continue to play and create.

Additionally, we examined the recycled business strategies like single-sponsorship and integrated branding and the ways in which we can negotiate their impact through parody, satire, and paratextual commentary. Finally, we examined the ways in which production worked with fans through alternative financing opportunities like micropatronage and official fan-made merchandise to allow for non-corporate control over content, additional content, and an expanded world. In this case study of *Carmilla* we have examined the ways in which this transmedia web series implements the four queer gestures of the queer intertextual commodity as tactics of survival in capitalist culture. By working with the audience through queer gestures the creative team behind *Carmilla* was able to negotiate hierarchical strategies of capitalism and commercial space to allow for more agency for both audiences and the creative team to play in the in-between ethically and with mutual respect.

It is unsurprising that new media texts leverage the participatory nature of the online environment, the affordances of their mediums and respective formats. Through a collaboration between content creators and audiences, post-millennial queer texts provide a haven for alienating commodification, while also normalizing personal, individual experience within the larger environment of the LGBTQ+ community. Post-millennial queer audiences are acutely aware of their power as consumers and as sexual beings and “as capitalism tries to regulate

sexual identity, inevitably some rebel against such strictures” (Griffin, 2000, p. 202-203). QIC audiences are actively invested in producing content for themselves alongside and with creatives within the media industry. The ongoing trend of new media to merge the diegetic and non-diegetic world in its canonical and paratextual interactions with audience allows for greater flexibility for critique and criticism of the same consumer culture in which media (and queer culture) thrives.

## 5 REMEDIATION & QUEERING THE UNSEEN CHARACTER

This chapter's primary focus is in examining the ways in which a remediated aesthetic can be used as a queer gesture creating radical ambiguity. Further, the radical ambiguity provides the audience the ability to not only interact with the text, but also participate in its creation through artistic expression. For example, the image below by u/heywhatsyourname is a fan art photo-manipulation that presents the town-limit sign for the town of Night Vale.



*Figure 5.1* “Welcome to Night Vale, Populations 1482 and a half.”

This image depicts a headcanon where the borders of Night Vale are ambiguous and fragmented contributing towards the series uncanny remediated aesthetic. This image is also an example of “fannish ekphrasis.”

Lucy Baker (2018) in her talk at FSN-NA Conference<sup>28</sup> explains that “fannish ekphrasis” is the desire to confess a sublime emotional experience, known by fans as “feels” or “tingles” through fanworks. Historically, ekphrasis is the verbal or written description of a piece of art. In this fannish variation Baker describes, any fanwork inspired by original art regardless of medium

<sup>28</sup> Fan Studies Network – North America Conference.

would be considered ekphratic in nature. Similarly, reparation fanworks like “fix-it-fics” are ekphratic, but instead of a sublime emotion they are a method of purging “unwanted emotional vividness” or “squick.” Regardless, of the emotional resonance, fannish ekphrasis is an embodiment of a cathartic release through artistic practice.

Fans use the artistic expressions created through fannish ekphrasis as personal headcanons or interpretations, which are then shared with others. According to Chera Kee (2018) in “No, but I’ve seen the gif,” sharing is a communicative act regardless of whether that sharing is of your own original art or the reblogging of images that a fan deems as true to their own interpretation or in fannish terms as “headcanon accepted.” Over time and through repetition some headcanons become fanon, a collective interpretation of the text, often becoming fan factions or ideological camps. Headcanon and fanon rely on iconography or a shared language of images to create intertextual webs between canon and fanon. Iconicity as a theory relies on two basic tenets: the first is the world will begin to look like the pictures we make of it, and the second is that metaphor is a method of “world-making” (W. J. T. Mitchell, 1986, p.152-3). As such, the iconography developed by fans for the series, including racial markers, indicate not only the individual and collective imaginary world of *Night Vale*, but our very real world as well.

The world-making of *Welcome to Night Vale* and the queer intertextual commodity more generally relies on the audience to create fanon that becomes the canonical world. Much like the way the world of images are a way of manifesting into our real world. In this chapter, I argue that remediation can be a queer aesthetic that is used to create radical ambiguity. Allowing for a multiform or heterotopic space to be created via audience interaction and expression. This multiform in all of its iterations is part of the official story world, making what would once be



considered fanon or fan interpretation into canon. Thus, opening the door for fans as participants, contributors and collaborators. Like any large collective of creators' various factions arise, in this case along racial and iconography lines. Despite the best efforts of the production team to create an equitable creative space the audience fails the queer intertextual commodity and the ideals of the project.

### 5.1 Welcome to *Welcome to Night Vale*

*Welcome to Night Vale*<sup>29</sup> is a neo-radio drama podcast in the style of a community radio station created by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor in 2012. The voice of Night Vale is the character of Cecil Gershwin Palmer who is the radio host reporting on town happenings. Played by Cecil Baldwin, an openly HIV-positive queer white man. Originally, Cecil was the only voice to be heard in Night Vale, but as time went on characters and their voices were added to the series—voices as diverse as the characters they portray. *Welcome to Night Vale* production has instituted a policy that characters of color within the program are to be played by actors of color in an effort to include a diverse set of voices and creative performances. Especially as there are no directorial notes provided to actors along with the scripts, so the vocal aesthetics of a character are left to the actor's discretion. This policy was instituted after a negative fan response when a white Jeffrey Cranor initially voiced the Latino character of Carlos. Quickly acknowledging the issue, Dylan Marron was cast in the role. Casting decisions are not the only way in which *WtNV* re-tools the radio drama for podcasting.

As a podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* uses aural storytelling traditions not seen since the Golden Age of radio but puts a modern twist on format—made possible by the affordances unique to podcasts as a medium. In a *Guardian* article, “Audible Revolution,” Ben Hammersley

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<sup>29</sup> *Welcome to Night Vale* is abbreviated to *Night Vale* or *WtNV* throughout.

(2004) created the term podcasting in an attempt to describe a new form of amateur radio that embraced time and location shifting. The term became widely popular and is used to refer to a new audio medium. J.W. Morris and Eleanor Patterson (2015) argue that “Podcasting is neither limited to nor defined by its technologies. Rather, it is a set of specific practices and cultural meanings that are entirely entwined with the technologies for its distribution, organization, and consumption” (pp. 221–22). Though podcasts are certainly related to radio in aural tradition, they are also unique from it. According to Richard Berry (2016), podcasts as a medium are inherently asynchronous, self-curated, and self-governed. Digital technologies have de-professionalized production and democratized distribution channels, allowing podcasts to serve both mass-market and niche content and audiences. Farokh Soltani (2018) argues that the intimate nature of podcast audio drama transitions it from radio’s theater of the mind to the theater *in* the body (emphasis original, p. 206). The podcast experience is hyper-intimate, often promoting focused listening and episode stacking or binge-listening. As such, audio drama podcasts have their own affordances and aesthetics separate from (if rooted in) radio. *Welcome to Night Vale* leverages conspiracy theories, a genre rooted in the intimacies of the mind.

The creators describe the original premise of the show as “a town where every conspiracy theory is true” (Murphy, 2014). It can be described as a small desert town’s local community radio station reporting on the mundane goings on like the local weather, news, announcements from the Sheriff’s Secret Police, mysterious lights in the night sky, dark hooded figures with unknowable powers, and cultural events. Writing for *TechGeek*, Erin Hill considered the uniqueness of the podcast to be “its presentation of what is ordinary,” adding that “many of the things that Cecil reports goes against our idea of normal, but [everything] is presented in a manner that makes it seem mundane” (Hill, 2013). While Mike Rugnetta of PBS’s web show,

*Idea Channel*, compares the show to horror writer H.P. Lovecraft's style of writing about fear of what we don't know. Rugnetta (2013) adds "But *Night Vale* turns Lovecraft's 'unimaginable terror' into 'drab mundanity'." *Night Vale*'s tone conflicts with the radio drama and community radio aesthetics it remediates. The transmedia world of *Welcome to Night Vale* is based on single sense mediums, whether podcast or written word. Regardless of the medium in which content is presented, the use of a remediation as a queer aesthetic is consistent.

## **5.2 Remediation as Queer Aesthetic & Gesture**

### **5.2.1 Remediation Recapped**

Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* define remediation in three parts. First, remediation is the intertextuality of mediation. That is to say, any new medium needs other older media to have a framework of significance. New mediums use older media aesthetics to make the newer media aesthetic or technology "make sense" to the user. Second, remediation is the inseparability of mediation and reality. Mediations are *not* simulacra but real artifacts and in many ways are indistinguishable from the "real."

Media function as objects within the world within linguistic, cultural, social, and economic exchange. Finally, remediation reforms. Remediation is the repurposing and rehabilitation of antiquated media into new mediations or digital forms. The assumption of reform is so strong that a new medium is now expected to justify itself by improving on its predecessor through immediacy (faster or easier access) or social and political ideology (digital being more democratic for example).

### **5.2.2 Remediation as Queer Aesthetic**

However, when remediation is used as a queer aesthetic it twists traditional aesthetics and technological affordances into something new and uncanny. Instead of making new media

familiar, comforting, or understandable to audiences or users, remediation when used as a queer aesthetic renders old formats, cues, and aesthetics as strange, other worldly, and in need of interrogation. The queer aesthetic of remediation enables queerness as function—a process resisting normative ideals of gender, race, class, and community embedded in the remediated structures of legacy media.

In the case of *Welcome to Night Vale* remediation is used as a queer aesthetics by repurposing golden age and community radio aesthetics in two significant ways. *Night Vale* is a scripted radio drama, an aesthetic form not popular since the early 1970s (with the notable exception of *Star Wars* in 1983). As such, *WtNV* is part of a larger radio drama revival seen in podcasting where the old form of layered audio (music, special effects, and vocals) provide an audioscape and serial narrative. Farokh Soltani (2018) argues that podcast dramas unlike radio dramas mix sound to create a whole scene similar to creating a musical composition (as opposed to radio drama's semiotic approach to sound). Further, he states "The podcast dramaturg, exercising significant control over the listener's auditory field, can utilize the expressive characteristics of sound without compromising the listener's perceptual experience of the world" (p. 205-206). Neo-radio dramas leverage the podcast's specific affordances when remediating he aesthetic, creating a more robust audio world than its predecessor in radio. The neo-radio drama format includes series like *Greater Boston* (Alexander Danner & Jeff van Dreason, 2016-), *The Thrilling Adventure Hour* (Workjuice, 2014-), and *Our Fair City* (HartLife, 2011-2016).

However, unlike other neo-radio dramas *WtNV* doesn't use the neo-radio aesthetic as its format. Instead, *WtNV* uses a community radio format for its aesthetic, including traditional segments like news, community calendar, ads, PSAs and horoscopes, etc. Here, remediation as a queer aesthetic twists these familiar segments into unfamiliar things. For example, the

“Children’s Fun Fact Science Corner” tackles topics like the weirdness of the moon (“Grove Park,” Y1 Ep. 5), the horror of the void (“The Mayor.” Y1 Ep. 24), and the terrifying possibility that consciousness can survive death (“The Auction,” Y2 Ep. 37). These topics are hardly appropriate for children and yet are presented in a cheerful manner and kid-friendly language, implying that for the kids of Night Vale this is absolutely normal. For the mundane (adult) listening audience we must interrogate why content that is labeled for children would take on inappropriate topics, and hopefully look at the problematic nature and ideology embedded in kids content in the real world. However, the most notable examples of remediation as a queer aesthetic are found in the weather and traffic reports.

#### ***5.2.2.1 And now, the weather...***

A prime example of a remediation as queer aesthetic is The Weather report segment. The Weather is an essential element of the series format and the only segment that is in every episode. It is the most iconic example of remediation as queer aesthetic in *Welcome to Night Vale*. The Weather report is, in fact, a musical segment. Each episode of *Welcome to Night Vale* features a different song in The Weather.

Fans have created fan art of the Weather segment in attempt at visualizing their interpretation. As seen in this piece by Sam Azzaro, the weather is often depicted as clouds raining music. Azzaro goes further and animates his interpretation bringing a sense of lived experience to the visual (this is only one image in a six-image animated GIF).



**Figure 5.2** “The Weather” by Sam Azzaro.

Through “fannish ekphrasis” (Baker, 2018) fans are attempting to express through art not only their visual interpretations of the world of *Night Vale*, but the emotional experience of living in the town of Night Vale via their lived experience of the podcast. In other words, fans are attempting to process emotional and bodily experiences of *Night Vale* through ekphratic art—in this case the experience of The Weather.

It is never explained in canon or by production why the weather report is music instead of anything to do with cold fronts or barometric pressure. Leading the audience to interrogate the remediation. Fan theories to explain the Weather range widely. One more fantastical theory posits that Nightvaleians are synesthesiacs and feel the music as they would through touch and thus literally feel the weather when they listen to music—enjoying the sensations of warm sun or light rain by listening to music (anonymous, 2015).<sup>30</sup> One variation includes the Weather music altering the actual weather to match the mood of the song (daisosaurus, 2015).<sup>31</sup> A more

<sup>30</sup> This is a common fan theory that could be argued to be fanon. I’ve been unable to locate an original source. It’s roughly dated to 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Other fan theories or headcanons include: Cecil is being censored regarding the weather as he was in talking about clouds in episode (airagorncharda, 2014); anytime Cecil mentions the weather, even in normal conversations, music plays from nowhere (minniehayashi, 2016; usuallyfine, 2014); and that in Night Vale, when MTV first came out it was locally referred to as the “The Weather Channel” (carlosteinterloper, 2015).

mundane explanation is the desert is almost always hot and dry, so instead of wasting the airtime on something repetitive they station plays music instead. Regardless, the remediation of this old generic convention from radio into its new medium of a podcast should make the program more accessible to listeners, but instead it only raises more questions.

### 5.2.2.2 *Traffic Report*

The traffic report is one of the many reoccurring segments included in the remediation of community radio within *WtNV*. Traffic reports are included over a dozen times over the series, including the pilot episode. Initially presented using verbiage associated with traffic the reports eventually evolve into existential poetry. In the pilot episode Cecil reports:

Traffic time, listeners. Now, police are issuing warnings about ghost cars out on the highways, those cars only visible in the distance reaching unimaginable speeds, leaving destinations unknown for destinations more unknown. They would like to remind you that you should not set your speed by these apparitions and doing so will not be considered ‘following the flow of traffic.’ However, they do say that it’s probably safe to match speed with the mysterious lights in the sky, as whatever entities or organizations responsible appear to be cautious and reasonable drivers.

In this first instance of the traffic report, we can see the use of phrases like “police issuing warnings” and “following the flow of traffic” as typical to modern radio traffic reports. However, the traffic report combines these mundane terms with fantastical events like speeding ghost cars and the “cautious and reasonable drivers” of the “mysterious lights in the sky.” In traditional remediation, the use of the older language and aesthetics should make this message more mundane, but in fact only amplifies the disconcerted feeling of the segment.

As time within the world of *Night Vale* passes the traffic report becomes more and more divorced from its origins in radio. Eventually, losing all references to commuting and traffic terminology. Over time, the traffic report has morphed into a segment of existential poetry like this example from the episode “Fashion Week” (Year 3, Ep. 69):

A man came and went. He was here before and now he isn't. How briefly the moment of *is* before the endless *was*. He was not a serious man, but then this is not a serious life. A man came and went. He was here before and now he isn't. We miss him. This has been Traffic.

Though the poetry filled with ennui about existence and the void, it also continues to use movement and time as its basis of metaphor connecting even this poetry back to its roots in traffic and commuting. By using remediation queerly, the creators of *Night Vale* have been able to incorporate deep human issues into what should be a purely utilitarian segment of radio.

Fans have interpreted the traffic reports in variety of ways including this piece by VT John Hurt “By the order of the city council, citizens shall obey all traffic lights” inspired by the traffic reports in *WtNV*.



*Figure 5.3 The traffic lights of Night Vale by VTJohnHurt.*

In this image we are presented with an empty intersection on a foggy night, an eerie empty space. The fog expands the presence of the lights, so lines of color reach out from traffic signal towards another. Though spooky, this image doesn't become uncanny until you realize that all of



the lights are on simultaneously with reds, yellows, and hints of green painting the empty sky. It is in this realization that an impossible situation has been visualized. Once connected to the inspiration of the piece, “By the order of the city council, citizens shall obey all traffic lights” we realize that we the viewer/listener as a citizen must freeze in time and space or mundanely break the rules and await whatever repercussions disobeying an ordinance incurs. The fan artist VT John Hurt has created a visual representation of an impossibility that shares the underlying queer remediation of *WtNV*. Leaving the viewer with more questions than answers, and a sense of foreboding.

The feeling of foreboding and the experience of the uncanny is central to the use of remediation as a queer aesthetic. For without these feelings, the audience will not desire to interrogate the object. More importantly, these feelings of uneasiness and uncanny are tied to queer trauma. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) in *Touching Feeling* argues that the uncanny, amongst a variety of other feelings and verbiage, are an attempt at “fisting the phantasmatic” that is both the pleasure and the shame of queer creativity (60-61). The uncanny feeling associated with remediation as a queer aesthetic expresses queer trauma and shame creatively by designing ambiguity and discomfort for the audience to experience as a form of catharsis and self-creation.

### **5.3 Mostly Void, Partially Stars: Radical Ambiguity**

Remediation as a queer aesthetic creates an uncanny feeling that expresses trauma through audience discomfort, it also creates a radical ambiguity that not only allows, but requires the audience to play with that trauma. Ann Cvetkovich (2003) argues that queer culture’s penchant for irony and ambiguity stems from the trauma of oppression. She links the “playful response to trauma” as a tactic of survival that is “topping trauma” — a type of “shame-creativity” as defined by Eve Sedgwick (Cvetkovich, 88; Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003, 63). In

*Welcome to Night Vale*, the radical ambiguity created from remediation and the “unseen” (undescribed) character of Cecil creates a multiform brimming with intersectional shame-creativity attempting to top the trauma of race, orientation, even disability.

### **5.3.1 Ambiguity**

Underlying remediation as a queer aesthetic is the concept of ambiguity, which is defined as the quality of being open to more than one interpretation; inexactness. Ambiguity is created in the gap of information — a denial of context that provides opportunity for creativity. William Empson (1947) outlines seven types of ambiguity within his research, including vagueness, which is essential to the successful implementation of remediation as a queer aesthetic. For Empson, “the strength of vagueness, in fact is that it allows (for) secret ambiguity” (p. 187). Forcing each listener to invent their own version of the text, which “are liable to conflict with one another” (Empson, p. 176). Simone de Beauvoir (1948) in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* argues that ambiguity is not absurdity but a location of struggle for meaning or conflict within the text. She states, “to say that it [the text] is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won” (de Beauvoir, 1948, p. 129). This struggle is between the listener and the text. It is a struggle for a meaning that is not fixed within the text, but that is earned by the listener by engaging with it. Remediation creates a vagueness by embracing the deficiencies in older forms of media and their aesthetics with the express purpose of incorporating ambiguity into the new text.

### 5.3.2 *Canonical Gap & Reverse Ekphrasis*

In *Welcome to Night Vale* ambiguity is created through remediation and canonical gap<sup>32</sup>, and listeners negotiate this ambiguity using reverse ekphrasis. Traditionally ekphrasis is a vivid description of a physical piece of art or visual landscape, often in the form of poetry. When reversed, as we see here, visual art is created from vivid descriptions—in this case the town and its inhabitants are created by fans from their descriptions in the podcast/community radio show. Remediation as a queer aesthetic creates a vagueness or ambiguity in the text. Mark J.P. Wolf (2012) in *Building Imaginary Worlds* argues that fans see inconsistencies or ambiguity as “merely gaps in the data” of the world that need to be “filled in” and if these canonical gaps are not filled in by the text, the audience will do so for itself (p. 45). In the case of *Night Vale*, the most common way of filling in the text is through reverse ekphrasis, where the listener creates an image (physical or mental) from the vivid, often dramatic, verbal description of the town of Night Vale and its inhabitants. By nature, each listener’s version of the world and its gaps are unique and often contradictory. The purposeful canonical multiplicity creates radical ambiguity in the text.

*Welcome to Night Vale*’s audience must use some form of reverse ekphrasis to interact with the text, as they would for any podcast (a mono-sensory medium). To understand the process of ekphrasis, one must first understand the modes of ekphrasis. According to W. J. T. Mitchell (1997), there are three modes of ekphrastic realization: indifference, hope, and fear. Ekphrastic indifference is the realization that language and vision will never completely match,

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<sup>32</sup> According to Mark J. P. Wolf (2012), “The idea of canon, that certain things are ‘true’ for an imaginary world demonstrated the desire for authenticity from the point of view of the audience” (p. 270). Canonicity is often disputed by audiences with two major camps forming: those who argue that all events that happen in the imaginary/virtual world are canon *or* those that believe only “official” events produced by the author of the work are canon (Wolf, 2012, p. 221). Canonical gaps are places within the imaginary world where detail is missing for the audience. This could be in the description of the world, narrative plot holes, or inconsistencies in the text (Wolf, 2012, pp. 38-47).

never be truly equal to one another. Ekphrastic hope is the moment when “the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in [the] imagination” (Mitchell, 1997, p. 3). When we realize that we not only have a sense or feeling for the work but can “see” through the description; in the case of reverse ekphrasis we actually see through visual art “the moment” described. Finally, ekphrastic fear is the “moment of resistance or counter-desire that occurs when we sense that the difference between the verbal and visual representation might collapse” (Mitchell, 1997, p. 5). All three of these modes occur when experiencing and analyzing ekphrastic art, reverse or otherwise. There is a continuous struggle between these three modes as we experience them organically, and in the case of *Welcome to Night Vale* the ekphrastic tension is centered around the character of Cecil, where all modes exist congruently and the collapse of verbal and the multitude of visual representation are canonical—where ekphrastic fear’s implosion instead becomes an explosion of possibility.

That explosion of possibility centers “the utopian aspirations of ekphrasis” to provide the “the mute image” a “voice” or in the case of reverse ekphrasis to bring a dynamic voice into view (Mitchell, 1997, p. 7). The collapse of ekphrastic fear then becomes an opportunity for ekphrastic hope, the central goal of which “might be called ‘the overcoming of otherness’” (Mitchell, 1997, p.9). For Mitchell, the otherness addressed in ekphrasis is beyond the mere dichotomy of verbal/visual, but extends to all representational binaries including that of race (black/white), age (old/young), gender (male/female), and even ability (disabled/able-bodied). Most importantly, ekphrasis deals with binary of speaker/listener or author/audience, as it necessitates the creation of art (mental or material) through the processing of art. Applying this to *Welcome to Night Vale* and the intertextual commodity, what would traditionally be

considered derivative artistic works become part of canon and fill in the purposeful canonical gap within the text—a form of radical ambiguity.

### 5.3.3 *Radical Ambiguity*

Historically radical ambiguity as a concept was applied to poetry and politics. Max Black's (1979) article "The Radical Ambiguity of a Poem" in *Synthese* provides a useful infrastructure to base our understanding of the concept as it applies here. Black conceptualizes radical ambiguity as having a set of characteristics that include at least one feature of its meaning that is ambiguous and that two or more readings of the text are in conflict with each other. Finally, it is only radical if, and only if, a sufficiently competent reader locates a subjective ambiguity in the text (Black, 1979, p. 94-95).<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, ambiguity is only radical if the ambiguity creates *purposeful* contradiction for the reader. By purposeful we mean that the author intended there to be contradiction and that the audience must interrogate the text to understand multiple interpretations simultaneously.

Pulling from the field of political economy radical ambiguity is a collective subjectivity that encapsulates internal contradictions to facilitate radical political thought. Bulent Somay (2016) states: "The only subject with a rightful claim to radical ambiguity is a particular subject, a defined plurality rather than a singularity, both a subject, therefore, and made up of interacting subjects, and a part rather than an assumed whole, that is, a subject among subjects" (p. 23-24). In fandom terms, radical ambiguity is disparate fan factions working together despite different interpretations of Cecil towards the common belief that complicated LGBTQ+ representation is important to social progress. In terms of queer theory, radical ambiguity is a type of coalition

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<sup>33</sup> For Black the "ideal reader" is one who is knowledgeable in the subject and format of the text, who is generally able to interpret artistic works without confusion over meaning.

building as described by Cathy Cohen (2005) in “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?”. That is to say that these contradicting meanings are part of whole work, and all are simultaneously true. Further, when we consider radical ambiguity as a socio-political technique, the conflicting ideologies work together towards a common goal or understanding.

#### **5.3.4 *Radical Ambiguity in Fan Studies and Participatory Worlds***

Radical ambiguity is then a vagueness or contradiction that is purposefully created by the author or authors in order to contain multiple conflicting ideas simultaneously with the express purpose of introspection and change. In this way radical ambiguity can create what Janet Murray (1997) in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* called the multiform. She describes the multiform story as a text with a single plot presented in multiple, mutually exclusive, but equally true versions. However, as we will see here with *WiNV*, the multiform is not limited to narratives, it can be a character, a location, or even a duration of time. When applying the concepts of radical ambiguity and the multiform to audience reception and fan studies several of these elements shift focus to interactivity, authority, and canonicity.

When examining radical ambiguity in popular texts, instead of poetry or political movements, we focus on the ways in which the text and the audience interact, much like Blacks's (1979) the text and the ideal reader. However, we must also take into consideration the underlying ideology of not only the intended meanings (conflicting or otherwise), but those not intended, yet discovered, or created by the audience. Unlike the ideal reader, the audience-participant is free to create outside the structure's intended format using interactive tools in unforeseen ways. Especially in the case of participatory worlds as described by Wolf as interactive worlds that allow users to make canonical changes or additions to the world (2012, p.

280-281). In this case, the multiform is only possible when a text requires, via the gap of radical ambiguity, *only* the audience's continued 'active creation of belief' for a variation to become canonical (Murray, 1997. p. 110). The authority of creation is extended to audience-participants in the queer intertextual commodity.

Radical ambiguity is purposefully created in the text by the originator, with the expressed intent to allow the audience to participate in the canonical creation of the text in a way that is free and open as in a participatory world. The audience's canonical creations or understandings of the text are in direct conflict with one another but are no less canonical. In this way, queer intertextual commodities that use radical ambiguity to create participatory opportunities for audiences are distinct from traditional or corporate transmedia content that Suzanne Scott (2010) describes as closing-down or sealing-off canonical gaps from fan works in the "The Trouble with Transmediation." Instead, transmedia content can create additional opportunities for radical ambiguity and therefore opportunities for audience-participants to co-create. Radical ambiguity only works when the audience is treated as a collective with equal authority over the text—giving all iterations equal footing within canon.

#### **5.4 Unseen Cecil: Radical Ambiguity + Canon = Multiform**

In *Welcome to Night Vale*, the primary example of radical ambiguity is created through the main character of Cecil Gershwin Palmer (played by Cecil Baldwin), who is purposefully and consciously left undescribed for the audience. Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor, the creators of *Night Vale*, have explicitly stated on multiple occasions that Cecil has not and will not be

described any further to the audience. Additionally, they consider every fan version or headcanon of Cecil as equally true, as canonical.<sup>34</sup>

The only physical description of Cecil provided to the audience is in the episode “Sandstorm,” where he is described as “A man, not tall or short, not thin or fat, with hair and nose resembling Kevin’s, but he does not have Kevin’s black eyes” (1.19). It’s important that we are never given a description of Kevin (beyond that Cecil looks like him). From this description we know that Cecil is an average-sized (presumably humanoid) male, that is not completely bald, and does not have black eyes. Racial identifiers unknown. Additionally, Cecil’s age is uncertain and given flashbacks within the episodes “Cassette” (2.8) and “If He Had Lived” (5.2) it is unclear whether he is ageless/immortal, or ages like a normal human. By leaving Cecil undescribed or described only in relation to another character without a description Fink and Cranor create radical ambiguity in the text, not in a small gap or crevice in the world building, but in the central persona of the series.

Though Cecil is played by a white voice actor and the racially specific casting practices of the series implies that the character of Cecil is therefore white. Kevin, Cecil’s doppelgänger is played by Kevin R. Free, a black actor. It is no coincidence that Cecil and Kevin are described only in relation to one another as mirror images within canon and that the creators’ of *Welcome to Night Vale* cast actors of different racial backgrounds to play these characters. Thus, allowing for the variety of fan headcanons regarding the character’s appearance to be equally valid, while also falling in-line with the ethnic and racially specific casting practices of the show, like the character of Carlos being recast with Latinx actor Dylan Mraron and Tamika Flynn being played by Black actress Symphony Sanders. However, none of the characters in *Night Vale* have

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<sup>34</sup> Cranor & Fink, FAQs, 2008; Hill, 2013; Lopate, 2014; Miler, 2015; Murphy, 2014; Smart, 2016; Stevens, 2017; Sturgess, 2016



distinct accents or use race-specific slang or grammar and the performance of these characters are largely left to the actors' discretion.

As the seasons progress, the creators do describe Cecil as having impeccable fashion sense, and his clothing is frequently described in the show. For his first date with Carlos, Cecil's outfit was his best tunic and furry pants ("First Date" 2.2). His work outfits have been described as capri pants and cummerbund, and a professional radio-hosting unitard in the episode "Niecelet" (6.3).<sup>35</sup> However, Cecil's bizarre choice in fashion is commonplace in *Night Vale*, with other citizens wearing equally strange clothing as explained in the episode "Fashion Week" (3.20). Given the lack of physical description for Cecil and the odd clothing described in the series, one would assume that clothing would become iconic for the character's visualizations by audience, however that has not been the case. Instead, Cecil's identifiers developed by fans in the first season of series (with no descriptions) have remained predominately stable, often incorporating new canonical visual icons alongside the established fandom iconography.<sup>36</sup>

#### **5.4.1 Fannish Iconography & Cecil Fan Factions**

Cecil's lack of description within the first season of *Night Vale* lead the audience to develop headcanons, fannish iconography, and fan factions around the character. Even as details

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<sup>35</sup> Cecil has worn yellow sponge clogs, cat ears, and tights to the opera ("Review," 3.21B). A honeycomb hat, a Hawaiian shirt, and leather pants ("Fashion Week," 3.20).

<sup>36</sup> The following analysis relies on W. J. T. Mitchell's discussion of iconology or the rhetoric of images, both what we have to say about images and what images say for themselves. As such, there is a reliance on semiotics' sign system, and art history's iconography as methodologies, alongside Mitchell's own framework. According to Mitchell (1986), "the artful planting of certain clues in a picture that allow us to form an act of ventriloquism, an act of which endows the picture with eloquence, and particularly with a nonvisual and verbal eloquence" (p. 41). The clues embedded within the image are icons or signs from art history and semiotics respectfully. Through an art history perspective, the icon is a symbol of an idea, theme, or virtue, within semiotics the sign is a combination of the agreed upon abstraction and the real-world signifier for which it stands. The image and its clues allow the viewer through our knowledge as an ideal reader with societal, cultural, and even philosophical knowledge to speak for the image.

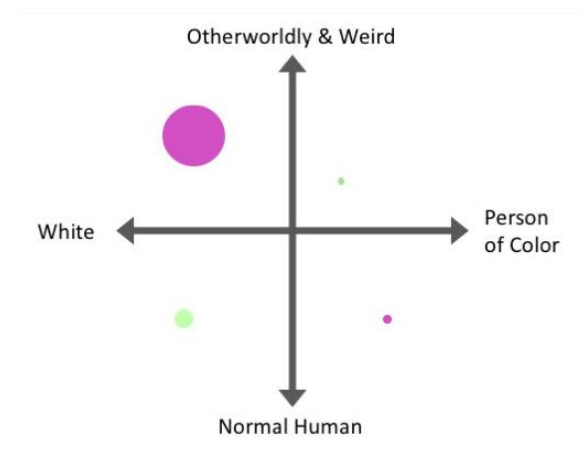
began to fill-in from the source text, “fans declared that they prefer to imagine the characters for themselves” (Stein, 2017, p. 79). Fan factions are the fragmentation of a particular fandom into smaller antagonistic fan groups struggling for discursive dominance over the meta-text (Johnson, 2017). One study participant stated, “Fan art especially adds to the visual narrative of media that is only presented as spoken word/text and allows the audience to compare and share personal visual interpretations of the text.” For *Welcome to Night Vale* the predominant fan factions are based around the fan-created image of Cecil and the fan iconography associated with the character. Fan art is a badge of identification, a signifier of your tribe or faction — an affective response based in fan iconography (Nielsen, 2018). Fan iconography and fan factions are further complicated by production establishing all fanon depictions as canon with equal authority over the character’s representation.

Likewise, Western fandom and queer communities have had decades, if not generations, of culture, social norms and philosophy to develop specific signs and iconography. (For instance, general fandom’s use of the backslash as indicator of a romantic pairing or LGBTQ+ community’s creation of the rainbow pride flag.) Further, individual fandoms like those around Sherlock Holmes, *Hannibal*, and *Welcome to Night Vale* develop specific signs and icons within their fandom—signs that can crossover to other contexts. For instance, Sherlock Holmes iconography includes the deerstalker hat, the tobacco pipe, and the magnifying glass. However, the most widely recognized icon for the character, the deerstalker hat, is not canonical, but part of an adaptation latched onto by audiences. Similarly, the *Hannibal* fandom incorporated a non-canonical flower crown as part of the series iconography, as a way of balancing the canonically dark content (*Flower Crowns*, n.d.). The flower crown iconography crossed over to *Welcome to Night Vale* and other individual fandoms to become part of the lexicon of fandom symbols.

E.J. Nielson (2018) in her paper at Fan Studies Network-North America developed the concept of “fannish iconography,” from a background in art history. Nielson described fannish iconography as a form of visual literacy that is translatable across mediums, styles, and often fandoms. It is developed by fans through their experience of fandom culture. As a visual literacy, fannish iconography creates recognizable forms that correspond to themes and motifs that are understood by audiences who recognize the artist’s motivations for creating the icon. Specific fandoms create iconography, symbols, and shared imagery regardless of whether the source text has provided such things and often despite canonical content, as is the case with *Welcome to Night Vale*.

To better understand the iconography and fan factions surrounding the imagery of Cecil, I’ve examined over 1500 fan art images to determine shared characteristics. To locate these images, I used two sources: Google Image Search and DeviantArt. Though tumblr is the most active social media site for *WtNV*, it is also incredibly difficult to search. According to Chera Kee (2018) tumblr is designed to “obfuscate the creator” as no identity verification is required, users can create multiple blogs, and generally users do not use the tagging system for categorization, but for commentary. As such, I found Google Image search pulled in tumblr posts alongside other fandom sources a much better method. Finally, DeviantArt is a main repository for fan art across multiple fandoms, including *WtNV*. I searched for the following terms or hashtags: “WtNV” and “Cecil,” and “PoCecil” (an acronym for Person of Color Cecil). I then sorted the art into categories that shared similar iconography or representations of Cecil. I determined there were four categories: Default to Whiteness, “Average” Person of Color, White & Weird, and Otherworldly PoCecil. Unsurprisingly, Cecil fan art breaks along racial lines.

However, there is a second categorical axis specific to *Night Vale* fandom: otherworldly iconography.



**Figure 5.4** The horizontal axis is racial and the vertical otherworldly iconography. The circles are a visualization of the percentages of images within each category.

#### 5.4.1.1 Default to Whiteness

When searching for images of the character of Cecil without any mention of race, the predominate image returned is of a white character. Of the 1669 images examined across Google Image Search and DeviantArt, 86.5% of the fan art images were of a version of Cecil that is white. The overwhelming dominance of white Cecil fan art belies the systemic belief that, “Whiteness is the unmarked category (marking others), the unexamined category (subjecting others to examination), and the norm (making others abnormal), and the cumulative effect is privilege (and disadvantage for others)” (Stanfill, 2019, p. 24). Though the default to whiteness was blinding, only 20.3% was a version of Cecil that was both *human* and white—an important distinction in a fandom focused on the uncanny. The following table shows the data breakdown of all images analyzed for this study by source.

**Table 5.1** Fan Art Factions by the Numbers

Source	Notation	Default to White	White & Weird	Average PoCecil	Otherwordly PoCecil	Total
DeviantArt "Cecil"	*	219	877	5	35	<b>1136</b>
DeviantArt "PoCecil"	!			5	7	<b>12</b>
Google "Cecil"	**	120	228	20	20	<b>388</b>
Google "PoCecil"	!			94	39	<b>133</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>339</b>	<b>1105</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>1669</b>
<b>Percentages</b>		<i>20.3%</i>	<i>66.2%</i>	<i>7.5%</i>	<i>6.0%</i>	

\* DeviantArt had over 2400 results.

\*\* These results are the first "page" of Google's 323,000 results.

! This was all results.

The fully human (white) version of Cecil is typically depicted wearing a vest or suspenders with purple tie. He is tall and thin and has white or blond hair. He usually wears glasses. Sometimes, he has tattoos. Despite 150 episodes and counting, Cecil has never worn anything resembling this outfit in canon. Cecil Baldwin (the voice of Cecil Palmer) in an interview for the "Outward" column at *Slate*, stated that fan art was a "group think experiment," where "Someone draws a character one way—let's say like Tim Gunn, blonde, square jawed—because that's what this voice conjured in their head... Because there are references to Pulitzer Prize-winning authors, this is what they imagine: blonde, dapper, bow tie, that sort of thing" (Stevens, 2017). The connection between Cecil and *Welcome to Night Vale* to the NPR aesthetic, provides a connection to the clothing described, as well as the presumed whiteness of the character by audience members.



**Figure 5.5** by Sekra (left) and **Figure 5.6** CecilHepworth (right) are fan art of Cecil meeting Koshek are examples of “Default to Whiteness.”

Headcanons are unique to each individual but are influenced by the larger trends and factions within fandom. Without a description (and often even with a description) we rely on other fans to develop a mental image of a character. One study participant explained,

My favorite [headcanon] has generally been the white-haired white guy that's really slim and has a long face and has all the tattoos down his arms. And I don't know why that was my favorite. But it just is. I don't know. I feel like it suits his voice well. But I do love the really, really imaginative ones that people have done where he has like tentacles and six eyeballs and all kinds of stuff like that. I don't know why I gravitated towards the other one but that's how I generally picture him, and then seeing Cecil with his face painted in the live show I'm like oh that's not right. That's not what you look like.

Confronted with the image of the actor, the audience member experiences mental incongruity—a discomfoting feeling with often visceral reactions. It takes a self-aware audience member to recognize their own internal biases through their preferred representation of a character. This is work that is rarely done by white audiences where societal racial norms default to whiteness, leaving an undue burden on fans of color.

There are many reasons for the default to whiteness fan faction to associate Cecil with this set of iconographies (including racial markers). The community radio remediating aesthetic of the series evokes NPR and its predominately white radio hosts. The show’s creators are white

and the actor who voices Cecil is as well. (Though his identical counterpart Kevin is played by a Black voice actor.) Louisa Stein (2017) in “Fandom and the Transtext” believes it is due, in part, to the fandom migration from *Hannibal* to *Welcome to Night Vale*, as the main *Hannibal* ship is between two white men who typically wear suits. This assertion is buoyed by the transfer of *Hannibal* fan iconography of the flower crown turned meat crown in *Night Vale* fandom.

The question of Cecil’s racial representation and general appearance is an acousmatic question. We the listener must determine for ourselves, based on sound alone, with no real context, the source of this voice. Therefore, we rely on our perception of vocal quality or timbre to envision a variety of factors including gender, race, education, and even regional origination.<sup>37</sup> However, according to Nina Sun Aidsheim (2019) this understanding of timbre is not innate, but a learned, culturally specific and collectively curated skill of the listener as well as the performer (p. 9). This is not to say that acousmatic blackness (and whiteness) does not exist, only that it is culturally created and performed through both vocal expression *and* the listener’s expectations. So, is it that Cecil sounded white (or not black) because of audible identifiers or is it that the audience based on previous experience expect a white protagonist? Regardless, of the reason the fandom around *Night Vale*, without clear racial markers for the main character, defaulted to white.

#### **5.4.1.2 White & Weird**

The whiteness of Cecil in fan art is complicated by the othering of the character through non-human iconography. The dominant fan faction for the character of Cecil has the character not only white, but “weird” as well. By weird, I mean that the character is depicted with all of the

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<sup>37</sup> Vocal timbre or quality is often referred to as “the color, vocal imprint, and sound of the voice” (Eidsheim, 2019, p. 6). On a technical level timbre encompasses everything about vocal performance that is not pitch and volume. Everything that makes a voice appear unique to the listener.

“default to whiteness” iconography, but additional otherworldly iconography is added, such as tentacles and a third eye. Tattoos also become more prevalent within this set of imagery. Additionally, the character not infrequently will get fangs or predator teeth, his eyes may glow, and he occasionally floats. The “otherness” of this iconography allows audiences to choose to be “the other” within society—to identify with being visually marked as “other” without the cultural consequences.



*Figure 5.7 tnbcfan (left) and Figure 5.8 by kinomatika (right) are representative images of the “White & Weird” Cecil fan faction*

The iconography for the “white and weird” Cecil is the dominant aesthetic within the fandom—with the third eye and tentacles being the most common iconography associated with the character. White and weird Cecil is ubiquitous with 66.2% of the fan art images examined utilizing this iconography and racial markers. The “weird” iconography has become the dominant iconography not because it matches canonical description, but canonical feel—the Lovecraftian aesthetic of the series.<sup>38</sup> In much the same way the vest, glasses, bowtie/suspenders

<sup>38</sup> The Lovecraftian inspired aesthetic itself could be racially problematic, if not for the production addressing the issue through casting, and in-world commentary on cultural appropriation and colonialism.



of the human (white) Cecil are associated with NPR and public radio. Additionally, these aesthetic elements are easily identifiable (especially in the associated *WtNV* purple), making fan art and cosplay recognizable to other fans.

### 5.4.1.3 “Average” PoCecil

However, as we focus on non-white representations of Cecil the dominant iconography is not tied to the weird or fantastical (or even the NPR “dapper”).<sup>39</sup> Instead they are more closely tied to the canonical descriptions of Cecil—through his unique taste in clothes. Using the hashtag PoCecil, we discover that fan artists focus on the bizarre clothing combinations associated with the character (furry pants, unitards, scarfs made of opera gloves) or clothing similar to canon descriptions, but in the *Welcome to Night Vale* purple (purple tunics being a perennial favorite). The variety depicted continues to hair style and color, and even representations of gender fluidity. However, the “average” PoCecil is less frequently depicted with tattoos as compared to his white counterpart. These “average” versions of Cecil as a person of color allow for all body types and abilities. This table shows the data breakdown of all PoCecil images analyzed for this study by source and category.

**Table 5.2** *Person of Color Cecil Image Breakdown*

Source	Average PoCecil	Otherwordly PoCecil	Total
Deviant Art "PoCecil"	5	7	12
Google "PoCecil"	94	39	133
<b>Total</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>145</b>
Percentages	68%	32%	

<sup>39</sup> Only about 17% of the “Average” PoCecil representations included the NPR-esque iconography of vest, tie, and glasses.

Roughly 68% of the fan art images identified as presenting a version of PoCecil are categorized here as “average.” By “average” PoCecil, I mean that the character depictions are human and reflect the variety of humanity, which average out to something relatively mundane (clothing choices aside). The “average” PoCecil fan art is the only categorization that included a variety of body shapes outside of the tall-thin body-type established in the NPR-esque “default to whiteness” category. Further, it is the only categorization that included depictions of a disabled or otherly-abled Cecil. The “average” PoCecil is an every-man, that can and does reflect back the diversity of humanity.



*Figure 5.9 Cecil at the Opera by rococonatsu (left). Figure 5.10 “First Date” by spaceinfusion (right).*



*Figure 5.11 Disabled PoCecil by voidandsky.*

When you use PoCecil the hashtag fans have designated for nonwhite representations of Cecil you predominately find whole human version of Cecil of every racial background included in the “person of color” categorization. Cecil Baldwin (Stevens, 2017) in an interview stated,

There was an interesting point of view where people were drawing Cecil as a person of color, as Native American, black, Asian, everything. And so we began to lament the fact that so many others defaulted to white. Why do we hear “respectable, intelligent, articulate” and think “white blond man,” you know? And so there was an interesting conversation about that—a tempest in a tumblr teapot.

The “tempest in a tumblr teapot” that Cecil Baldwin mentions above is the “fan-tagonism” or fan feud between the “white and weird” and “average” PoCecil fan factions (Johnson, 2017). A fan-tagonism so prevalent in the meta-discussion of the series that *The Smash! Survey* podcast devoted a segment to the issue of racism in the fandom.

For that segment the podcast released a survey on racism in the *WtNV* fandom and over the course of two days had 300 respondents. The survey revealed that 89% of the respondents “were uncomfortable with the level of racism in the fandom on tumblr” (*The Smash! Survey*, 2014). Of the 11% that responded that they “didn’t find the community unwelcoming towards fans or characters of color,” they reported that they felt fans of color were “overreacting,” “complaining,” or “trying to push their ideas on everyone” (*The Smash! Survey*, 2014). We can view the general unease with discussing race and outright disdain for alternative views as part of the systemic racism embedded in fandom.

Mel Stanfill (2019) argues that “the idea that it is rude to talk about race is rooted in white supremacy” and “fans of color are generally denied relevance” by other fans (p. 28-29). Rukmini Pande (2018) argues that the structural racism of fandom requires fans of color to either accept that certain pleasures or explorations of racial representation are unavailable to them, or embrace being identified as a “fandom killjoy” who brings “unwanted drama to fan spaces” by

identifying failure within the fandom (p. 13). Interestingly and unfortunately unsurprisingly, tumblr—a platform defined by its “social justice warrior” user-base and *Welcome to Night Vale*—a text designed to be inclusive by production are failed by audiences who default to structures of racism. In the case of *WtNV*, like so many other fandoms, the denial of racism is to deny fans of color enjoyment in the fandom through trolling, intimidation, or just willful ignorance by white fans to believe fans of color.

The variety of representation within “average” PoCecil category emphasizes the variety of experiences by fans of color. A pointed visual representation that there is no monolithic racial experience to be ascribed. Instead, we must embrace all the variations within fandom and culture, including the truly weird or otherworldly.

#### **5.4.1.4 Otherworldly PoCecil**

Yet, relatively few of the images in this study found an “otherworldly” PoCecil despite searching tumblr blogs devoted to the hashtag like: Night Vale of Color, PoCecil and only PoCecil, and All Hail the Mighty PoCecil. Of the PoCecil representations 32% are considered to be “otherworldly” in presentation, and of all the images presented this category accounts for only 6% of all images in the study. Even those representations that are “otherworldly” PoCecil are relatively tame, most featuring a third eye and tentacle tattoos in their “weird” version, with only a few (less than 1%) images having actual tentacles depicted.



*Figure 5.12 An image collage and PSA by weird-at-last.*

This category blends iconography from the other factions, pulling in the third eye and tentacle tattoos, as well as the canonical “odd” clothing from both the “white and weird” and “average” PoCecil fan factions.

Fans of color through their art are showing that even in the world of Night Vale where the most bizarre things are normalized that the most extraordinary thing imaginable is not the otherworldly, but the everyday. Regular people of color thriving are as fantastical as a white guy with tentacles and a third eye.

## 5.5 Conclusion

As E. J. Nielson (2018) puts it “how you visualize a character is not neutral.” The choices audiences make in developing and disseminating their own personal headcanons of Cecil and characters more generally, particularly through fan art, is a political act and to pretend otherwise

is disingenuous. The image itself is a “sign that pretends to not be a sign, masquerading as natural immediacy and presence” (Mitchell, 1986, p. 43). When we see an image, it feels real and natural to us, and as such, the types of images we create and populate into the world frame the way we interact with the media text, the real world, and each other.

According to W. J. T. Mitchell (1986) the image is a “site of special power that must either be contained or exploited” as such it becomes an idol or a fetish—a sign of race, social class, and sexual other that is a feared object (p. 151). Further, this image/object inspires contempt, a contempt that “stems from the recognition that these signs, and the ‘others’ who believe in them, may be in the process of *taking* power, appropriating a voice.” (Mitchell, 1986, p. 151). With *Welcome to Night Vale* and texts like it that require audiences to contribute towards the creations of the image, the ability to contain or exploit the image of Cecil is explicitly made available to the audience and not the content creator—the author. Allowing, no insisting, that the image is an ambiguous sign—up for grabs.

Study participants generally attributed the ambiguity of the text as contributing towards the queerness of the text, alongside LGBTQ+ representations within canon, and the otherworldly or uncanny content. One participant stated “Yes, absolutely hell yes,” the ambiguity of the canon contributes towards the queerness of the text. “If there's an unstable notion of what canon comprises, or if the canon itself is ‘unstable,’ and is still under construction, it’s negotiated in any way, then that really just falls directly into this idea that boundaries are permeable, that they can be, that things are performed.” The ambiguity of the text allows for a variety of identities to lay claim to the text, its iconography, and meaning. *Welcome to Night Vale* by leaving Cecil as an undescribed character and by insisting that every headcanon is included within the world,

creates a space for fans to become collaborators, to have authority over the text, to have conversations about representation, and to play under the “glow cloud.

## 6 A FAILURE OF ETHICS (OR WHEN EVERY CAPITALIST CONSPIRACY THEORY IS TRUE)

*Welcome to Night Vale* unlike *Carmilla* began as a completely independent media production that promised anti-capitalist ideals that, ultimately, were undermined by its commercial success. In this chapter, I will highlight three queer gestures that ultimately failed to queer capitalism: the remediation of parody ads, micropatronage, and fan-made merchandise. To queer capitalism through gesture is not a negation but a negotiation of capitalist structures that leverages queer self-representation, an ethical hybrid economy, and dispersed authorship to encourage an inclusive and intersectional queer community and futurity.<sup>40</sup> *WtNV* initially used parody ads, micropatronage, and fan made merchandise as queer gestures to create an ethical hybrid economy that provided equity with its audience-collaborators. However, over time each of these gestures lost their queerness to “commercial intertextuality” or to a “corporate transmedia storytelling model” by prioritizing profits over community (Hardy, 2011). Moving *WtNV* from queer intertextual commodity, both part of and apart from traditional consumer culture, to become an indie transmedia franchise fully immersed in traditional neoliberal capitalism. As discussed in the previous chapter, the failure of *WtNV* is not in queer self-representation or audience collaboration, but in a failure of economic ethics.

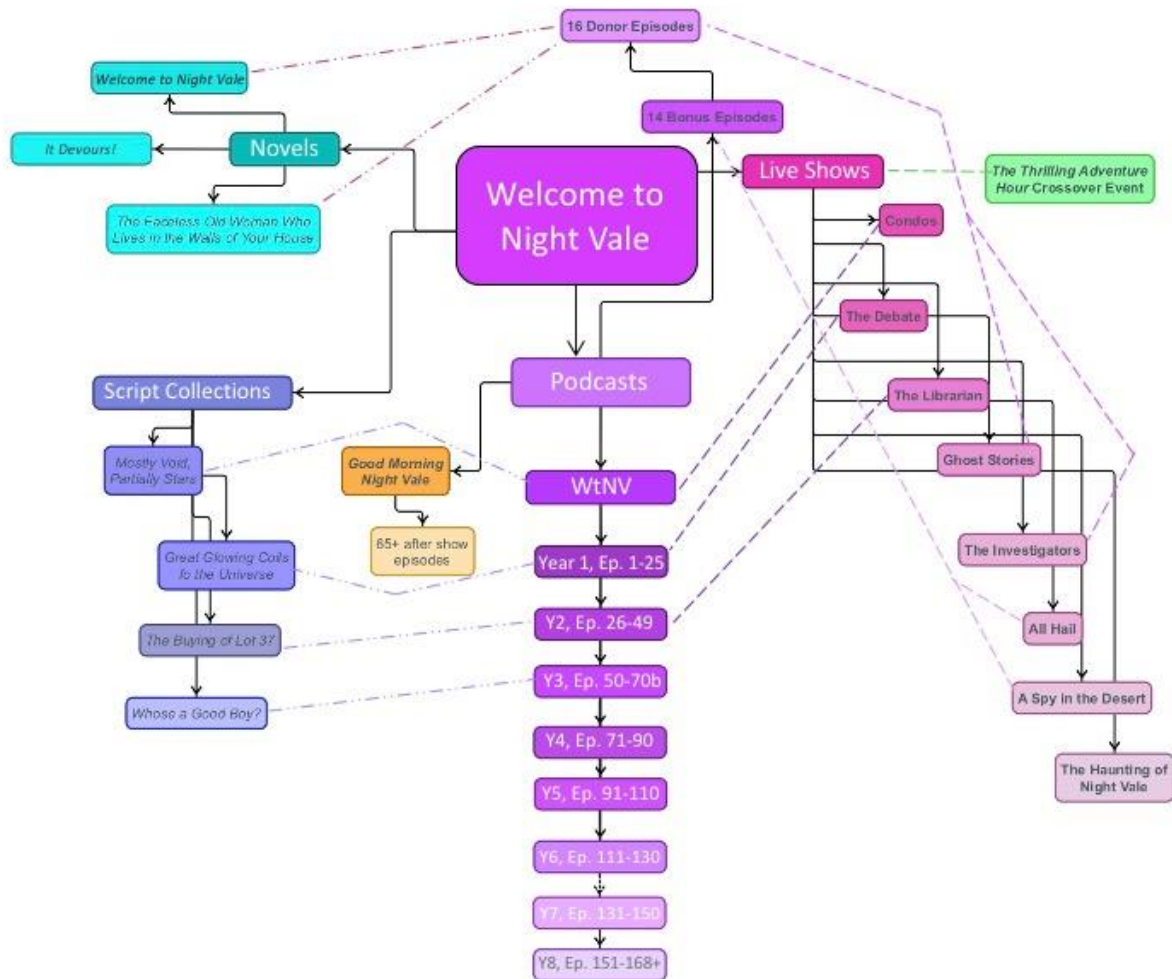
Like all queer intertextual commodities *Welcome to Night Vale* has a complicated transmedia text that incorporates audience-created texts into the canonical world. This vast networked world includes the main podcast in its eighth year (over 168 episodes), four script collections, three novels, eight interactive live shows, and a morning-after paratext podcast.

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<sup>40</sup> Ethical hybrid economy is a concept create by Lawrence Lessig in *Remix* (2008) that describes an economy that is both gift and commercial in nature that “respects the rights of the creator—both the original creator and the remixer” (247).



# Queer Intertextual Commodity



**Key**

<span style="background-color: #800080; color: white; padding: 2px;">WtNV Podcast</span>	<span style="background-color: #FF00FF; color: white; padding: 2px;">Live Shows</span>	<span style="background-color: #FFA500; color: white; padding: 2px;">GMNV Podcast</span>	<span style="background-color: #00FF00; color: white; padding: 2px;">One-Off</span>
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Content colored chronologically dark to light.

Paratextual & Non-Canonical Content

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Dashed lines indicate canonically connected.

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Morse lines indicate paratextual connections.

*Figure 6.1 Intertextual map of the indie franchise WtNV.*

As you can see in the transmedia map, *Welcome to Night Vale* incorporates a variety of mediums and formats into the transmedia world, including a crossover event that connects *Night Vale* to the *Thrilling Adventure Hour*. More importantly, the live shows connect to the main podcast in complex ways. In some cases, like “Condos” and “The Debate” major plot elements of the main series are toured around the world before being released to the general audience. Other live shows were released as bonus stand-alone content. Of these, two live shows “All Hail” and “A Spy in the Desert” were released as a special thank-you to Patreon donors. The release of these episodes includes the interactive audience elements in the recording, highlighting audience participation in the creation of these episodes. *Welcome to Night Vale*, unlike other objects presented here, regresses over time to become less open to audience contribution, and actually removes established reciprocity with audience-creators and anti-capitalist policies to favor IP ownership and control—a failure of morality within an ethical hybrid economy.

### **6.1 A Word from Our Sponsors: Denny’s & the Problem of Parody Ads**

*Welcome to Night Vale* uses parody radio spots as part of its remediated queer aesthetic<sup>41</sup>—as it uses the ads not to make the podcast seem more familiar and easier to understand, but instead to render the advertisements (and the larger world of *Night Vale*) as “other.” The series uses parody for the advertising spots to infuse the podcast with a liberal, even anti-capitalist, social commentary by presenting everyday capitalism as creepy and suspect to the listening audience. *Welcome to Night Vale* makes no distinction between real and imaginary corporations and businesses in its use of faux advertising. Mixing real businesses like Arby’s, Denny’s and Olive Garden with fictional locations like Dark Owl Records, Big Rico’s Pizza, and

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<sup>41</sup> Remediation as a queer aesthetic is one of the queer gestures discussed throughout this project. It is successfully used in *WtNV* with other segments like “the weather” and “traffic report” as discussed in the previous chapter.

StrexCorp Sybernists Incorporated.<sup>42</sup> When *WtNV* first began running faux advertising spots and parody advertisements they were unpaid and unassociated with the real brands presented. Advertisements were strictly included for humor and criticism—a form of “culture jamming” (Klein, 2009).

The faux parody ads began as a way of expressing concern over the mandates of commercialism within brand culture and even concern over the success of subcultural groups that on the surface critique brand culture, like the hipster movement.<sup>43</sup> The use of faux advertisements is an example of what Sara Banet-Weiser (2012) refers to as “people use[ing] the logic, strategies, and language of brands as a dominant way to express our politics, our creativity, our religious practices—indeed, our very selves,” in this case the people are the podcast creators (p. 3). In the first year of *WtNV* production the mega-corporation StrexCorp Sybernists Incorporated was initially introduced through the first of six faux advertisements. The initial advertisement was in part two of the episode “Sandstorm” (Y. 1, Ep. 19b). The sandstorm reveals that Night Vale and the rival town of Desert Bluffs are actually mirror towns, including twisted doppelgangers (Cecil’s is Kevin). The ad spot reads:

StrexCorp Synernists Incorporated.  
 Look around you: Strex.  
 Look inside you: Strex.  
 Go to sleep: Strex.  
 Believe in a Smiling God: StrexCorp.  
 It is EVERYTHING.

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<sup>42</sup> In fact, over 60 businesses have faux advertising spots during the run of the show with at least 15 real companies included.

<sup>43</sup> The hipster movement began in the 2000s as a subculture focused on authenticity, personal creativity and taste. Generally eschewing mass-produced products and popular trends. However, it quickly devolved into its own commodified aesthetic that became mainstream. Hipster has become an insult referring to someone who is pretentious and is overly concerned with appearing counter to the mainstream. The series comments on this movement with ads and Community Calendar references to Dark Owl Records.

It is no coincidence that the long-term adversary is a large corporation that exudes religious rhetoric in its advertising, two common institutions that post-millennial audiences have a skeptical relationship with at best, have completely abandoned or at worst are vehemently opposed. The mega-corporation becomes a major plotline in year two, when the corporation takes over the town. In the year-end finale the town of Night Vale revolts, led by teenager Tamika Flynn (Symphony Sanders). It is unsurprising to note that this storyline is completely funded through micro-patronage and merchandise sales, as the anti-commercial and anti-corporate sentiment is not compatible with traditional sponsorship.

*Welcome to Night Vale* also includes parody ads for real corporations for more direct and relatable commentary. The integration of real brands into personal, indie, and alternative media for social commentary is a common practice (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Klein, 2009). For obvious reasons, this inclusion has historically been unpaid to avoid conflicts of interest between the brand, and the criticism created within the media text. Alternative media that include branded integration into their financing model, do so with the knowledge that the brand will have some control and even censorship of the content. Though integrated branding does not immediately preclude a text from becoming a queer intertextual commodity, as we've seen in the web-series *Carmilla* in previous chapters, it can certainly affect the media's ability to provide meaningful critique, whether through parody or other means.<sup>44</sup> The creators of *Welcome to Night Vale*, Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor, were clearly aware of the potential conflict between the parody ads critique and the commercial capital these businesses could provide.

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<sup>44</sup> *Carmilla* began as an integrated branding campaign for Kotex, but as the series continued on more of the text became crowdfunded and the sponsor brand eventually dropped its funding all together for the film and novel. Notably, the official social media accounts were never under the Kotex brand control. *Carmilla* also utilized in-world parody content to distance itself from the sponsor brand, however its commentary was never about the product but about stereotypes and social stigma of menstruation.

Joseph Fink is an avid Twitter user and has discussed the use of ads in *Welcome to Night Vale* regularly since the show blew up on the social media site Tumblr in 2014. Fink spends the most time explaining that there are no real advertisements in the show to the audience. On January 15, 2014 he joined a long thread to explain “The ads are things we make up, and they contain no real info. We don’t ask for permission to make them” (Planet of Finks, Twitter). It’s clear that the creators viewed these faux advertising spots as rebuking commercial and capitalist excess, as can be seen in a few of the many potential early examples:

Step into your nearest Subway restaurant today and try their new 6-inch mashed potato sub! Top it with a delicious assortment of fresh vegetables, like french fries and Nutella. They’ll even toast or poach it for you! There are several Subway locations in Night Vale, all easily accessible through witchcraft and chanting. And between now and November 30, buy nine reverse colonics and get a free 40-ounce soda or freshly baked tobacco cookie. **Subway: Devour your own empty heart.** (“The Lights in Radon Canyon,” Y. 1, Ep. 8)

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Today’s broadcast is sponsored by Target. Target is a great place to shop, and they would like you to consider the variety of *silence* in this world.

The deathly silence when an argument has reached a height from which neither party can see a safe way down. And the soft wet silence of post-coital breath-catching. Silence in a courtroom moments before a man’s life is changed completely by something *so insignificant* as his past. And the silence of a hospital room as a man, in front of everyone he loves, lets the heat from his clenched hands dissipate into the background hum of the universe. The quiet of outdoor distances. Of wilderness. Of the luxury of space. And the quiet of dead air on the radio. The sound of a mistake. Of *emphasis*. Of your own thoughts when you expected someone else’s. *Shop at Target.* (“Street Cleaning Day,” Y. 1, Ep. 15)

According to Klein (2009), culture jamming is “the practice of parodying advertisements in order to drastically alter their messages” in order to provide a counter to corporate messages; “the most sophisticated culture jams are not stand alone ad parodies but interceptions—counter-messages that hack into corporation’s own method of communication to send messages starkly at odds

with the one that was intended” (pp. 280-281). The fact that there is not communication between the real brands and the show is essential for establishing their authenticity as culture jammers, particularly in regard to establishing trust with an audience they are relying on for direct micro-patronage.

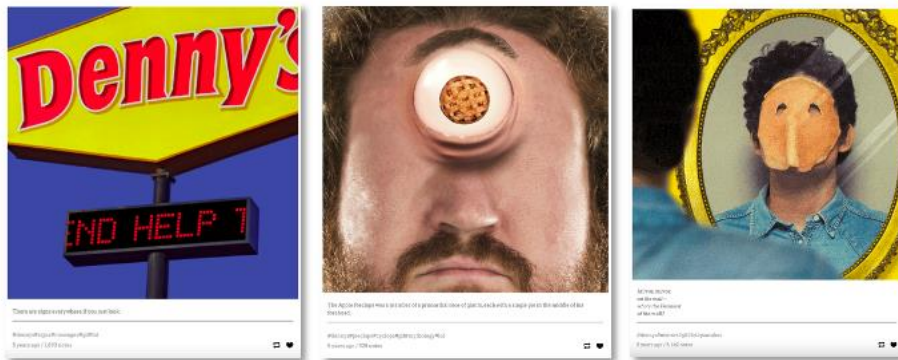
However, the use of real-corporation parody ads became problematized with the Denny’s advertisement spot. Below is the *Welcome to Night Vale* parody ad spot from the episode “First Date” (Y. 1,n Ep. 27). This appears as a “word from our sponsors” within the program:

Looking for a home security solution? Good luck with that.  
 Want to feel safe when driving your car? Get in line.  
 Fearful when walking home alone at night? Well, you *should* be.

When life seems dangerous and unmanageable, just remember that it is, and that you can’t survive forever. Denny’s restaurants. Why not?

This parody ad focuses on the illusion of safety and places Denny’s as equally dangerous as burglars, traffic accidents, and muggings. Commenting on the lack of food safety and quality at Denny’s, and potentially the associated odd characters associated with their late-nite service. This combination of real social critique and surreal aesthetic is common for the program.

The relationship between the real world and Night Vale became even more complicated when Denny’s started using a similar tone and aesthetic as the parody spots in their official social media advertising—potentially extending the Night Vale world *and* reducing the efficacy of the intended commentary. The official Tumblr account (@DennysDiner) was operated by Grafik, a branding and marketing agency located in Virginia, focused on developing an organic account with a mix of created memes, images, reblogs, and promotional posts (*A Beginners Guide to Denny’s Tumblr*, 2015). Some examples of the Denny’s blog include:



*Figure 6.2* These are posts from the @DennysDiner Tumblr account created in 2016.

In the first example above the post is an animated GIF of a Denny's sign that reads, "My name is Jeff. I'm trapped inside here. Please try the French toast and send help. Thanks. Ghosts eat free...Free receipts. Free napkins. Free Tibet." The text that accompanies the image is "Signs are everywhere if you look." *Welcome to Night Vale* frequently features content around entrapment, ghosts and even mandates regarding signage.<sup>45</sup> The aesthetic and narrative elements are clearly within the same vein. Other posts feature a cyclops similar to Cecil's fanon third eye and a pancake face in a mirror referencing the *Night Vale* character, the Faceless Old Women Who Secretly Lives in Your House. However, the most damning example of the merge between *Welcome to Night Vale* and Denny's is the appropriation of the *WtNV* logo seen here:

<sup>45</sup> Two prominent episodes that feature signage include: "Walk" (Y2, E15/41), and "Poetry Week" (Y1, E20). Please see the previous chapter for the many examples of Cecil depicted with a third eye by fans, creating a visual iconography for the character and series. The Faceless Old Woman was first featured as the second season opener (Y2, E1/26), but has appeared no less than 23 times on the series and is even the central character for one the novels.



*Figure 6.3* The official logo for *Welcome to Night Vale* is on the left. The @DennysDiner Tumblr post from 2015 is on the right.

As the *WtNV* production never acquired permission from Denny's to feature them in one of their parody ads, Denny's did not ask permission to modify *WtNV*'s social media icon for their social media campaign. Denny's like *WtNV* skirted the legal line as the Night Vale eye is the only trademarked element of the social media icon and the Denny's remake removes the eye and replaces it with its own iconic signage adding to the Night Vale skyline. It also replaces the *WtNV*'s purple with Denny's red and text to complete the transformation. Naomi Klein (2009) calls this back and forth between culture jammers and brands a form of “semiotic shadowboxing” as “what began as a way to talk back to the ads starts to feel more like evidence of our total colonization by them” (pp. 296-297). This appropriation of tone, aesthetics, and iconography by Denny's not only conflates messaging within *WtNV*, but also co-opts what was once an anti-corporate ethos into a commercial outreach towards a youth audience residing on Tumblr and associated with *Welcome to Night Vale*.

## 6.2 Listeners as Sponsors: Modern Artistic Patronage

The second queer gesture to fail in queer intertextual commodity of *WtNV* is the use of micropatronage as alternative financing—the gift as financing. The gift economy is one half of the “ethical hybrid economy” as defined by Lessig (2008) and an essential cultural element within fandom and queer communities (Stanfill, 2019b). Historically, “the gift” is not financial



but artistic or educational labor that is provided to the community which often adds additional value to media owners (intended or otherwise). As a gift, reciprocity is expected in the exchange which has traditionally been fulfilled by the affective response by the community. However, in a post-millennial turn, the traditional fan gift economy is transforming to include direct financial contributions towards production—particularly in independent and alternative media, akin to patron-artist relationship of the Renaissance age.<sup>46</sup> As we will see with *WtNV*, micropatronage as a queer gesture can fail when the QIC no longer treats donations as gifts, but as venture capital that requires no return on investment, breaking the expectation of reciprocity with sponsors.

With the advent of digital networks and secure online financial transaction, new forms of alternative financing have become readily available—crowdfunding and micropatronage.<sup>47</sup> Though these two terms are often used simultaneously, I’ve made a clear distinction between the two in terms of financial structure and their relationship to the gift economy. I do not view crowdfunding as part of the gift economy, but instead as a primarily neo-liberal technology of capitalism via Paul Booth, where the expectation that only “quality” or “good” projects will become funded regardless of socio-cultural context (Booth, 2015, pp. 242). Crowdfunding can be seen as a traditional capitalist exchange where a “backer” invest money with the expectation of a return on their investment, usually a concrete and specific “perk” or product. I will note that generally the lowest tier of backer is part of the traditional gift economy with only cultural

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<sup>46</sup> A caveat, fans and audiences have always directly and indirectly contributed towards the financial success of media production, whether through ticket and merchandise sales or through viewership-advertising. I argue here that aside from public broadcasting and community media, direct financial contributions to production (pre-product) was exceedingly rare for the vast majority of audience members.

<sup>47</sup> The term micropatronage is used by Carlos Scolari and Atoni Roig Telo (2015) in describing a type of crowdfunding around two documentary transmedia projects in Spain. Though the two do not make the distinction between crowdfunding and their term, I believe their description of an ongoing donation to cultural works falls in line with my use of this term.

capital provided in exchange for financial investment. Initially, crowdfunding without some form of exchange was considered illegal in the U.S. as a form of gambling (at best) and fraud (at worse), which meant that crowdfunding sites used digital rewards for even the lowest “gift” tier of their campaigns, and even required campaigns to reach minimum thresholds before any money is actually collected from backers.<sup>48</sup>

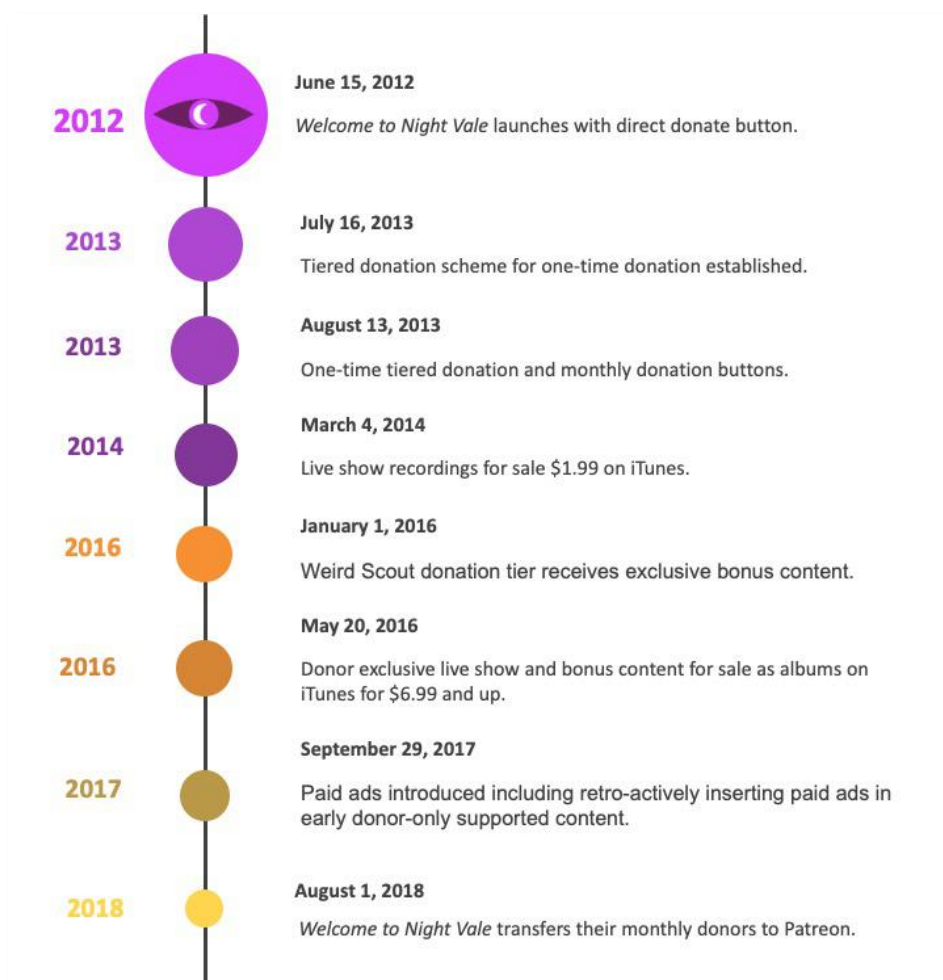
However, micropatronage is more closely aligned to the gift economy. As a one time or on-going contribution towards an individual or project, these donations are typically used as funding for publicly available media content or projects. Patrons receive very little traditional incentive for contributing towards the project beyond the cultural capital of contributing to a project that was meaningful to them (paying artists whose work they consumed for free). Initial micropatronage sites like “Buy Me a Beer/Coffee” were hosted internationally and many projects used Paypal to collect direct donations. However, the U.S. based micropatronage site, Patreon, was released in 2013 and quickly became the forerunner in the market. The rhetoric and verbiage around micropatronage services and technologies are rooted in the gift economy as friends buy each other a round of drinks, donations are made to charities or public works, and the company Patreon is making direct reference to the Renaissance patrons with its name.

*Welcome to Night Vale* launched in 2012 with a single Paypal donate button that was “pay what you can/want.” For the first year of the podcast this was the only form of financing for the series. However, in 2013 production launched a tiered donation system, incentivizing larger one-time donations with rewards. However, a month later the site re-establishes the smaller

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<sup>48</sup> It wasn't until 2015 that U.S. laws adapted to allow for online crowdfunding to become an investment opportunity, selling securities instead of promotional items in order to garner funding. With the JOBS Act (and changes in SEC rules 146 and 504) a new classification of investment became available: equity crowdfunding. By creating a new regulation group, the door has opened for smaller start-ups to gather hundreds of smaller financial backers, instead of more traditional investment systems: venture capitalists, angel investors, and silent partners.

monthly donation portal. During this time all non-physical bonus content is made public to the entire audience. In 2014, recordings of live shows go on sale via iTunes for \$1.99.



*Figure 6.4 A timeline of WtNV's financing practices from 2012-2018.*

In 2016 there is a major shift in the financing of the series, starting with the tiered content becoming exclusive to certain donor classes. Second, production begins repackaging bonus content and live shows into albums costing \$6.99 or more. In 2017, the show began including paid advertisements into the podcast, but not only in new content. It spliced in paid advertisements retroactively throughout the previous five seasons. Finally, in 2018 it moved its monthly micropatron subscribers to Patreon, where bonus content is managed and protected according to the pay structure.

The creators of *Welcome to Night Vale* began the podcast as a completely fan-financed project, relying solely on donations from listeners. Thus entering “a unique moral economy created when fans are explicitly courted as a project’s primary backers” (Scott, 2014, p. 168). In the case of *WtNV*, that moral economy was based in a gift culture that was anti-corporate and anti-advertisement. Initially *WtNV* used parody advertising as part of its remediated aesthetic, it rejected all offers of paid advertising and promotions. Over time it developed other revenue streams including selling merchandise and live tours to supplement its now full-time employees. However, it eventually transitioned from a micropatronage “gifting” system and moved toward a more traditional crowdfunding “exchange” system—changing the terms of agreement with audience/patrons. Additionally, it defaulted on the implicit promise of an ad-free (at least from paid advertisers) program, continuing its trend towards becoming an indie transmedia franchise.

### **6.2.1 *A Two-Headed Deer: Double Dipping through Retroactive Paid Ads***

*Welcome to Night Vale* began life as a podcast completely funded by fan donations or micropatronage. The show’s creators spent years appealing to fans for donations on the merit of the show being ad-free or sponsor-free. Though the show quickly developed other financing methods like the live shows, merchandise sales, and book deals. The series creators continued to advocate for the show as an audience funded project. Joseph Fink, one of the two creators, has defended the show’s ad free status via Twitter over a dozen times between 2012-2015<sup>49</sup>), including these statements:

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<sup>49</sup> However, Fink has stated, “I mean, I don’t want to say definitively that we’ll never have paid ads. Who knows?” (January 15, 2014, Planet of Finks, Twitter). Thus, allowing for the possibility where the show may need or want to include real (paid) ads in the future.

“I don’t want ads on the podcast. If I wanted ads on the podcast, I’d put them in the actual podcast” (September 29, 2014, Twitter).<sup>50</sup>

“We choose not to put advertising on our show. Not everything needs to make money all of the time” (September 29, 2014, Twitter).

“We’ve never run a single ad, but many people think we’re getting paid for our weird fake ads. (We don’t)” (March 13, 2015, Twitter).

In the FAQs page of *WtNV*’s host website Uncommon Books the creators solidify their position for the non-commercial nature of the show “Right now we are not accepting sponsorships. We are maintaining an *ad-free* show” (emphasis original, April 15, 2015). However, in 2016 *Welcome to Night Vale* began integrating paid advertisements into the show, breaking trust with fans who had financially supported the once ad-free project.

The creators came under a lot of scrutiny by fans for their decision to directly monetize the podcast through advertising, but it was in 2017 when the creators started to retroactively insert ads into earlier episodes that the dispute over the additional ad-based revenue stream came to a head with the fandom. In a reddit subgroup with 46 thousand residents or followers a user posted about his experience of discovering a sponsored ad in old content, a post that was 95% upvoted by the community. This post states “...I feel weird about this because I always said I appreciated *Welcome to Night Vale* because of their lack of ads, but now it feels even weirder because they changed an old episode to do it...” (*R/Nightvale - Advertisements Retroactively Added to Old Night Vale Episodes.*, 2017). The thread that develops is a discussion of ways to skip or even edit out the ads from these episodes so that listeners can return to the original aesthetic and promise of an ad-free show.

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<sup>50</sup> Around this time several entities were using *WtNV* content to con fans into advertising content. There was an unofficial YouTube channel re-broadcasting the show with monetizing turned on and someone developed a dummy *Night Vale* app that was more ads than re-broadcasted content.

Not only is *WtNV* including retroactive ads, but they are actively seeking out commercial sponsorships on their website. The FAQs section of the website not only states that the show is welcoming new sponsor companies but provides a fee schedule and form. The use of ads may have been a financial necessity for the series as its production and support staff grew, but its blatant reversal without transparency to its previous financial supporters, while actively recruiting commercial sponsors, struck an unsympathetic chord with the listening audience. Specifically, as the rhetoric used by the show's creator on social media focused on providing artists a living wage without conceding to the specific industrial context of the show's production. On Twitter we can see an example of Joseph Fink defending the move to include ads retroactively (despite his many earlier claims of *WtNV* being a purposefully ad-free project) with fans, particularly through his engagement with user @gillidactyl below:





**Figure 6.5** Twitter exchange between @gillidactyl and Joseph Fink a co-creator of WtNV over the ethics of retro-actively adding sponsor to a program that had been funded by fans with the assurance of an ad-free experience (Fink, *healthcare is a human right*, 2017).

As you can see in this conversation, audience-participants who contributed directly to the project as micropatrons viewed themselves as a sponsor and in many cases felt the change to including ad-revenue, particularly for old episodes, was a breaking of trust between the patrons and the creative team.

Lawrence Lessig states that in an ethical hybrid economy, “There are lines that companies can’t cross. Those lines are drawn by the understanding of those within the community. To their communities, hybrids will try to signal their virtue, or the fairness of the exchange they offer” when that sense of fairness or trust is broken so too is the community and ultimately the creative project fails on an ethical or moral level. From my own study participants, both audience-participants and content-creatives, trust was the most used descriptor of their relationship and a key attribute ascribed to these types of projects that separated them from mainstream corporate offerings. Without trust as a foundation and value of distinction the queer intertextual commodity shifts to become an indie transmedia franchise invested in

neoliberal capitalism. The transition from a project that prized fanon as canonical input and that utilized a gift economy to fund co-creative art as a queer intertextual commodity into a closed system embracing neoliberal capitalism as corporate transmedia that goes beyond gifting as Scott (2009, 2014) describes it, as fans see their financial contributions being used as venture capital with no return on investment instead of the gift it was intended to be. A slap in the face from a program that courted its audience based on anti-capitalist rhetoric.

### **6.3 Sheriff's Secret Police: Enclosing & Policing Fan-Made Merchandise**

*Welcome to Night Vale*, like most of the queer intertextual commodities discussed here utilize another form of alternative financing, licenses fan-made merchandise as an additional revenue stream as a queer gesture. Generally, this allows audience members who would already be making this work as part of the grey market to become legitimized as official merchandise, and as we saw in the *Carmilla* example this can even extend to incorporating fan-created concepts as canonical content. However, this policy also implies a certain amount of permission to audiences to create these works, even those fans/works that do not become officially recognized by production. For how could creative production discover work to include as official, if they first did not exist as unlicensed? Yet, *WtNV* routinely uses strategies of enclosure and policing through legal action and corporate policy.

#### **6.3.1 Enclosure and Official Fan-Made Merchandise**

Mel Stanfill (2019) in her monograph *Exploiting Fandom* argues that enclosure is comprised of two parts that can be applied to fans and their labor. The first aspect of enclosure is the shifting of fan created commons content into intellectual property used for industry benefit. The second aspect is that the fans themselves become a working class whose labor is appropriated by industry (p. 175-176). Stanfill focuses on larger corporations who use



proprietary platforms and “terms of use” to strip users of IP rights and revert them to corporate owners, a process dubbed “fandom sharecropping” by Suzanne Scott (Scott, 2009; Stanfill, 2019b). However, the concept of enclosure is applicable even to smaller independent media texts, like *Welcome to Night Vale*, *Carmilla* and other queer intertextual commodities. As we’ll see here, collaborative creative practices can be enclosed or fenced in. Though many fan artist and creatives are more than happy to work within these confines, these arrangements are often inequitable despite the best efforts of everyone involved.

Typically, fan-made merchandise becomes official or licensed merchandise when the artist’s work becomes popular enough on social media sites like Tumblr or DeviantArt and it comes to the attention of the marketing and creative teams.<sup>51</sup> The fan artist is then approached with an offer to purchase the exclusive reproduction rights of the design for the official shop. At first glance, *Welcome to Night Vale* adheres to the ethical hybrid economy model Lessig advocates for and which is essential to the queer intertextual commodity. Not only does it provide citation or recognition to the artist on the official merchandise store—they also provide financial remuneration and even legal protections for the artist’s work. However, the legal rights also come with responsibilities that show an unequal power dynamic between *WtNV* production and artists. In the case of *WtNV*, very few fan artists were willing to speak with me about their work showcased as official *Night Vale* merchandise. Of the eight artists I contacted, only two *WtNV* official fan artists were willing to talk to me. Three responded that they weren’t legally able to discuss their deal and felt uncomfortable even talking with me about their general interactions with *WtNV* production because of the legal paperwork they signed. Legal

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<sup>51</sup> Rarely, a fan artist’s work becomes official merch from designs they are already selling in the grey market of artist alleys and Etsy shops comes to attention of legal and then creators. *WtNV* has never had such a conversion, but both *Carmilla* and *Undertale* have.

nondisclosure and scare tactics are common enclosure strategies for large commercial IP holders, but is relatively uncommon for smaller independent productions. The use of legal contracts is an absolute necessity to establish reciprocity, citation, and financial remuneration. However, the lack of transparency and the inclusion of scare tactics can transform a gesture into a capitalist strategy.

Every alternative financial strategy used as a queer gesture can also be used as neoliberal capitalist tool. The difference is an ethical one. My study showed that for queer intertextual commodities there is a sense of reciprocity, trust, and fair play that is expected in these exchanges as outlined by the community members and creatives. As I've stated before I was surprised that trust was the most often used value used by both creatives and audiences to describe their relationship. Though perhaps I shouldn't have been, as reciprocity and citation are queer practices that also have fannish roots. Both fandom and the LGBTQ+ community expect an equal exchange or at the least a token of exchange within the gift and affect economies. In terms of reciprocity and citation, fan works selected by production to become official merchandise are incorporated into the store front alongside and mingled in with commissioned work. As you can see below:



*Figure 6.6* Here is the main page of the WtNV store. The purple highlighted items are created by fan artists whose work have become official merchandise. As you can see, they are intermingled with commissioned designs with no differentiating marks.

It is only when you click on an item that you can see that *WtNV* provides artistic credit to the fan artists by naming the artist, linking out to their preferred portfolio or social media pages. It's important to note that *Welcome to Night Vale* does not provide such notation for commissioned art and design.



*Figure 6.7* Close up of an item page for a fan artist created tarot deck that has become official merchandise, by Jay Holloway. Highlighted in purple is the citation section of the page

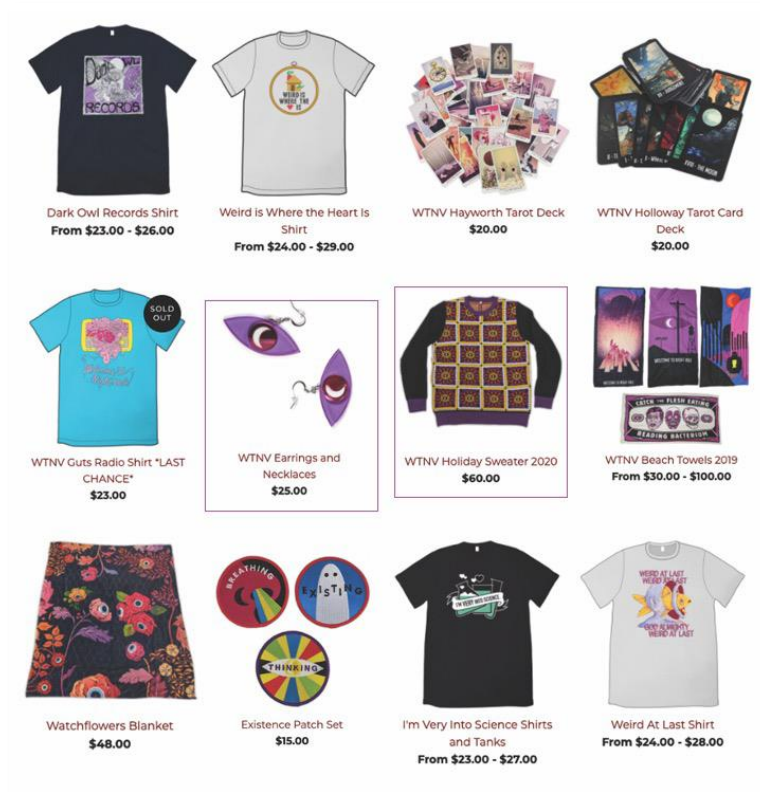
In the example above Jay Holloway began the tarot deck as an artistic challenge on their Tumblr blog, creating a new card each week. They were very purposeful in choosing their iconography, such that it is inspired by *Night Vale* but that it doesn't use anything trademarked or copyrighted. Describing the backing design they state that, "I wanted to do something that utilizes elements of *Night Vale* without being distinctly *Night Vale*, and I feel like the Bloodstone Circles would be an excellent way to represent that, seeing as it is heavily implied that bloodstones are key to *Night Vale* religious practices" (Holloway, 2014). When I spoke to Holloway, they said that when *WtNV* creative team approached them that they wanted to change the backing to include the logo (as well as add a bag with the logo) so that tarot deck would fall in line with their branding. Holloway was happy to oblige with this change, as they didn't have the financial means to make the tarot deck design a real product, as the outset capital was prohibitive. By allowing *Night Vale* to include their logo design, the creative team put up production costs that

Holloway couldn't afford and both parties received previously unrealized profits. However, it is telling that the Night Vale marketing team had to insert their trademarked logo into the project as in its original design it was not connected closely enough to already be part of their trademark or copyright.<sup>52</sup> Though Holloway and many other fan artists are content and even excited to work with official production as they feel legitimized by the interaction and receive financial and promotional benefits, they are also often falling into "sharecropping as the approved model of being a fan" as discussed by Scott and Stanfill (Scott, 2009; Stanfill, 2019, p. 174). Many artists, like Holloway, do not require licensing or legal agreements to benefit financially and legally from their work. However, "Compared to legal censure or not being able to participate at all, fans might be willing to accept almost anything. In these ways, structural coercions make it easy for fans to contribute free labor and difficult to opt out" (Stanfill, 2019, p. 172). The enclosure created by production through published policy and threats of legal action elsewhere, have made fan artists "grateful" for the opportunity to create under any conditions.

In the case of *Welcome to Night Vale* roughly 15% of the official merchandise was originally designed by fan artists or non-commissioned art that was then licensed by *Welcome to Night Vale* to be included as official merchandise. According to several artists I spoke to the most common form of financial remuneration is a one-time licensing fee with exclusive reproduction rights being awarded to *WtNV*. Some artists negotiated an additional royalty fee based on the number of units sold and a few high-production cost items split proceeds after cost like the tarot decks between the artists and *WtNV* production.

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<sup>52</sup> More detail around the trademark and copyright holdings will appear later in this chapter.



**Figure 6.8** Above are examples of fan artist designed official merchandise from the WtNV shop. Creators from left to right and top to bottom: Monica Knighton (Dark Owl Records), Jeffrey Rowland (tentacle house cross stich), Jessica Hayworth & Jay Holloway (tarot decks), Jessica Hayworth (guts), David Malki (jewelry), Rob Wilson (sweater), Rob Wilson, Iain Burke, Jessica Hayworth (beach towels), Jessica Hayworth (scarf), Rob Wilson (patches), Kate Leth (science), Jessica Hayworth (weird at last).

Of that 15% only two items (highlighted in purple) use the trademarked logo in its design (apart from packaging), so all of these items could be sold legally (if in the grey market) by the fan-artists without a license or permission from WtNV. In fact, *Welcome to Night Vale* has historically been legally over-zealous in protecting its brand from use, despite its limited implementation of trademark (only the two logos are trademarked, no titles or verbiage have appeared in my trademark searches) and titles are exempt from copyright and can only be secured via trademark.

### 6.3.2 *Enclosing and Policing Unofficial Fan Art/Merchandise*

If as Joseph Fink argues “artists should be made a living and eat off their work” then why not fan artists, especially if their work does not break copyright or trademark laws (Joseph Fink, *healthcare is a human right*, 2017). For reciprocity, what is good for the goose, must also be good for the gander. Yet, since its start, *Welcome to Night Vale* has had a strict policy of encouraging fan art and creative works, but limiting that work to the gift economy—strictly prohibiting the sale of fan-made merchandise outside of the official *WtNV* store. According to the FAQs on the main website, “All of us who work on *Night Vale* do so for free, and much of the money we make in return is from the sale of *Night Vale* merchandise. For that reason, we ask that no one sell their own *Night Vale* merchandise, and we reserve the right to ask you to remove any *Welcome to Night Vale* merchandise from your shop. Thanks for being cool about this!” (Cranor & Fink, n.d.) The argument here is that since the show is free and without ads (at the time this policy was originally posted, though the wording has never changed even with the inclusion of ads) that the only way the creative team made a living was through ancillary merchandise and live shows. Thus, by selling your own fan-made merchandise you were depriving the creators of making a decent wage. This policy is defended by arguing for equity, fairness, and by invoking trust. It is an argument of morality and not law, based in the gift economy. It is also an argument based in enclosure, fencing off fan works into acceptable non-commercial, but still promotional works and unacceptable unlicensed commercial, but not necessarily illegal works.

The urgency in separating official merchandise from unlicensed grey market merchandise is important as the distinction between fan-created and official content and merchandise is no longer clear to buyers. Especially as alternative media makers and fans are often using the same manufacturers and distribution centers like Etsy, Topatoco, and Redbubble. As Santo (2017)

explains, “Even as marketing for fan-made merchandise relies upon a particular rhetorical positioning of maker and buyer as sharing fannish dispositions, increasingly, in terms of production, the line between fan-made merchandise and fan merchandise produced through official licenses is becoming blurred” (p. 330). Likewise, we must take into consideration that “the sharp separation between sharing and commercial economies is steadily losing its significance” not only in the marketplace, but in culture as well (Stanfill, 2017, p. 80). There is little to demarcate licensed merchandise that is official versus fan-made merchandise in the marketplace, especially for fans who are not curating pristine collectibles.

This conflation of official licensing and fan-made merchandising has created issues of authenticity and authority for intellectual property owners, which have historically sued fan-merchants over infringement (Chatelain, 2012; Kretzschmar & Stanfill, 2019; Murray, 2004). Some mainstream IP owners like Disney have created online licensing portals, but submissions are rarely if ever approved for individual artists. Where the queer intertextual commodity differs within this queer gesture is that IP owners are officially, if sometimes informally, extending the role of “licensed creative” to fans, in the creation of merchandise, in the development of ancillary products including storylines and world-building, and therefore are sharing authorship. Further, they are more frequently sharing financial incentives with fan artist whose work becomes official merchandise through the purchase of reproduction rights, licensing, or profit sharing. However, as we’ve also seen with *Welcome to Night Vale* the reciprocity is often limited or even revoked when values shift within the creative team.

In addition to their public policy that requires all fan art/work to be non-commercial or licensed through their official shop, the official social media accounts for *Welcome to Night Vale*, Joseph Fink, and Jeffrey Cranor frequently post reminders to their fans that though “the fan



art is awe-inspiring and exciting, please do not sell any of your *Night Vale* merchandise” (Night Vale podcast, 2013, Twitter). As we saw earlier Joseph Fink can get in heated debates with fans over intellectual property rights and limits of fan art in commercial spaces. Over the years there have been several waves of fan response to *Night Vale*’s position from outrage to full support. However, for many fans these policies and the enforcement of them through cease and desist notices have created an environment that is cautious of upsetting the creators, as can be seen in this creative response to the above tweet: “Personally I’m too afraid of consequences from the sheriff’s secret police to even THINK of selling bootleg *Night Vale* stuff” (Renata Sancken, 2013). *Night Vale*’s enclosure and policing strategies are effective in reducing unofficial fan made merchandise in the market, but at what cost to fans?

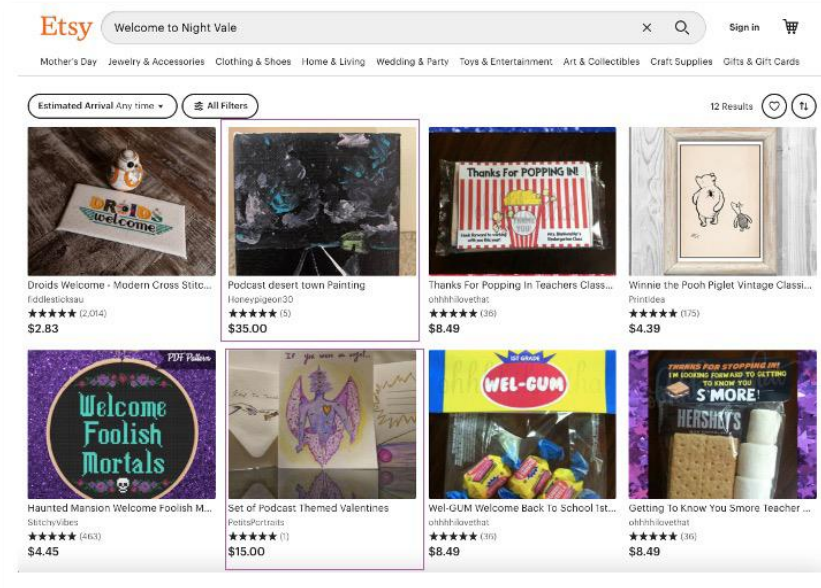
**Table 6.1** *Unofficial Fan-Made Merchandise*

(Search results at each site for items tagged with the respective titles and variations thereof.)

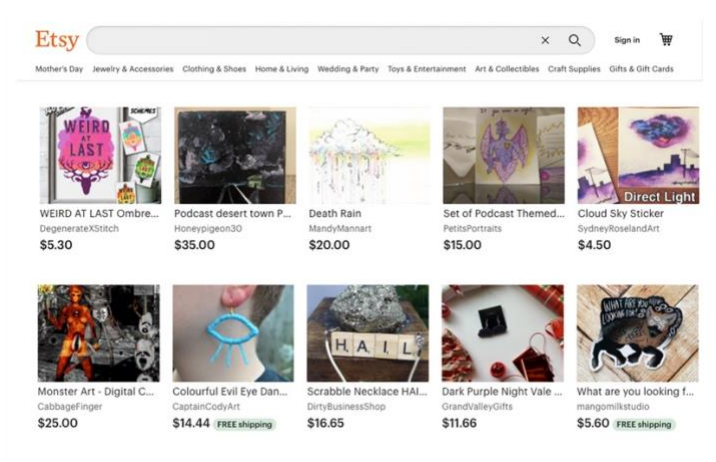
Etsy	
<i>Undertale</i>	3,102
<i>Carmilla</i>	315
<i>WtNV</i>	12
Redbubble	
<i>Undertale</i>	13,350
<i>Carmilla</i>	868
<i>WtNV</i>	259

As you can see *WtNV* has by far the fewest fan-made merchandise for sale on either Etsy or Redbubble, despite being the only one of these texts to be still producing new content. From this list you can see that Etsy only had twelve items tagged with *Welcome to Night Vale*, and only three of these results were actually related to the podcast. Fans have stopped using the title

of the show to avoid cease and desist letters and having their stores revoked on the site. Even using a variety of other search terms looking for merchandise, there are only ten items for sale on the site, none of which infringe on the podcast's trademark or copyright.



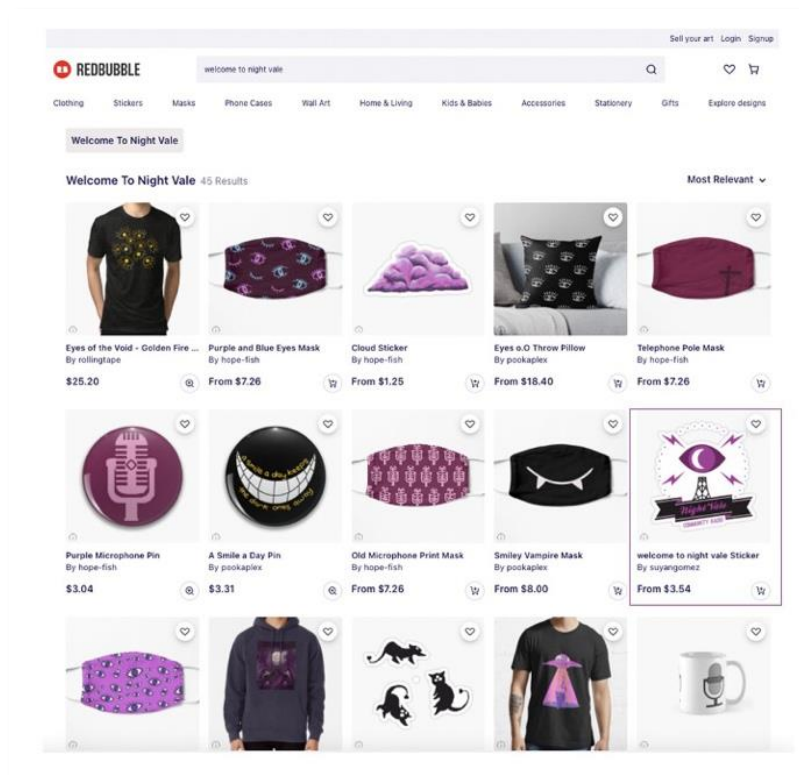
**Figure 6.9** Here is a screen capture of the Etsy search results for WtNV. As you can see only two are actually connected to the series (highlighted in purple).



**Figure 6.10** Using several search terms derived from the title and character names, I can only find 10 items for sale related to Night Vale on Etsy. None of which infringe on trademark or copyright.

Etsy's handcrafted mandate is more in line with the artistic values espoused by the creators of *Night Vale*, yet it is clear that fans have been driven from the site. Redbubble is another

commonly used site for fans to sell their designs. This site is intended for more mass-produced merchandise, unlike Etsy's individual artist ethos. Here we can see that 259 items were tagged with variations of the *Welcome to Night Vale* title (only 40 used the actual title itself). This is a mere fraction of the fan made merchandise for sale related to *Undertale* (2%) or *Carmilla* (29%).



**Figure 6.11** Here you see the search results for WtNV on Redbubble. Of the 40 items in the result only one design infringes on the trademarked logo.

Yet, examining these results only one item actually infringed on *WtNV's* trademarked logo. Most of the *Welcome to Night Vale* merchandise that is for sale in Artist Alleys and sites like Etsy and Redbubble are legal as *WtNV* as they do not include the logo and there are no character designs or descriptions to fall into copyright or that have been trademarked by the podcast to infringe on. The only connection for many of these items is character names and an aesthetic associated with the series.

Artist Alley's in particular have a long tradition and expectation of independence cultivated by both fans and the various media industries who attend fan conventions. They are part of long-standing cottage industries relying on fandom commons, their grey market status, and a blind eye from large corporate IP holders (Jurgenson, 2019; Leung, 2017). According to Mel Stanfill (2019), "The legal gray area occupied by fan works also contributes in important ways to exploiting fan labor...Doing legally troublesome work makes it harder to be protected as a worker" despite much of fan activity (even profitable fan enterprises) having good cases for fair use, the default is the assumption of piracy that IP holders encourage or even falsely enforce (p. 171-172). Which when IP holders come into fan spaces that have historically been free for expression and commercial interests like Artist Alleys and make demands, like *Welcome to Night Vale* has at DashCon, DragonCon, and Anime Boston, fan artists automatically defer to their supposed better knowledge of legal rights with little fuss.<sup>53</sup> One of the reasons that *WtNV*'s policing of these fan spaces is particularly important and upsetting for fans is that it can be considered a harbinger of change—a change that does not bode well for the fan arts and crafts cottage industry. A level of scrutiny in a fan space that hasn't been seen before, and in which "commercial speech extends into spaces governed by expectations of independence" (Hardy, 2011, p. 14). That commercial speech is relying on enclosure and legal policing to enforce real and implied trademarks, copyright, and ownership that is not as closely tied to an ethical hybrid economy as had been previously thought.

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<sup>53</sup> I personally witness representatives at these conventions go around and ask fan vendors to remove *WtNV* inspired items from their stock, citing infringement on their brand. However, few of these designs were actually infringing on the podcast's trademark, which has only been applied to its logo. Many fan artists turned to giving away banned merchandise as promotional items, in an effort to recoup losses.

#### 6.4 Becoming StrexCorp: Conclusion

In *Welcome to Night Vale* the town of Desert Bluffs is its mirror city, but instead of infinite conspiracy theories and uncanny spaces Dessert Bluffs is the hyper-realized suburban commercial space, including the evil megacorporation StrexCorp. There is a season long plotline where StrexCorp invades Night Vale and the town rises up in a revolt lead by Tamika Flynn, a teenage girl of color (Year 2, 2013-2014). This allegorical tale is intended to present a Marxist tale of revolution from capitalist oppressors. However, as we've seen here *Welcome to Night Vale* has failed to uphold these ideals as it has grown and become more mainstream in ideological messaging and industrial practice.

*Welcome to Night Vale's* changing financial and legal practices is concerning as it seeks to emulate mainstream media's commercial structures treating fan labor and micropatronage as venture capital that requires no return on investment, instead of as the gifts they are—gifts that should be reciprocal in nature. Instead, *Night Vale* production focused their efforts in regifting content by including ads in fan-funded episodes, policing (often illegally) unofficial fan-made merchandise in non-professional spaces, and creating a library of IP through Night Vale Presents. To be clear, I am an advocate for independent media making money that support creators and artists. I do not view the use of advertisements, sponsorships, or direct sales as “selling-out” or other negative terminology. I believe that artists have the right to change their financial strategy to best support their needs. (Ad revenue is certainly more stable income than fan donations!) However, production must do so in a transparent manner that is respectful of the audience who has financially support them in the past and acknowledge the changing structures and the ramifications these changes will have on their position of political and social commentary. I would be remiss in not mentioning here that though *Welcome to Night Vale* has

failed as a queer intertextual commodity in terms of alternative financial practices, it has succeeded aesthetically and socially.

The question then becomes is it enough to succeed as a queer intertextual commodity in terms of radical ambiguity and representation? What queer gestures are essential to a post-millennial queer sensibility? If the commodity derives financial success through the exploitation and containment of fan labor for its survival it cannot be considered ethical. It can no longer be seen as a queer intertextual commodity as it is no longer reciprocating in good faith with the audience who is performing fan labor on their behalf. Independent media historically rely on fan labor for survival as fans provide marketing and promotional work for a favored text, labor that indie creators cannot afford through more traditional means. Beyond mere word of mouth, fans create artistic work that has value independent of the inspiration text, for which in an ethical market (even a grey one) can be leveraged for financial or other compensation by fan artists and creators. The concern here is not that independent media is changing financial structures to emulate mainstream media, but that it is doing so in such a way that it is losing its connection to an ethical relationship with fan artists and creators in which they rely. Otherwise, we are at real risk of losing ephemeral and gift-based art like the queer intertextual commodity as they leverage “corporate transmedia” or “commercial intertextuality” strategies as described by Hardy (2011) to become indie transmedia franchises divorced from the ethical economies in which they were originally created.

## 7 THE HAPPIEST ENDING? A CODA<sup>54</sup>

In the two main case studies presented here we have seen how, *Carmilla*, a media text born of branded entertainment and corporate sponsorship used queer gestures to undermine, negotiate, and resist capitalism through collaboration with its audience. We have also seen how *Welcome to Night Vale*, a completely independent podcast with anti-capitalist ideals succumbed to traditional corporate structures to eventually violate its moral economy alienating its audience. Both of these alternative queer media texts belong to the post-millennial queer sensibility, though they both have succeeded (and failed) as queer intertextual commodities in different ways.

What we can take away from their examples is there is an ongoing development of transmedia and intertextual experiences that are being developed with the expectation, even desire for cocreation by/with the audience. As Louisa Stein states, “we should understand these debates about transmedia as debates about control in the face of a changing mediascape, in which the meaning of authorship appears to be shifting to a more visibly collaborative and ongoing process” (Stein, 2017, p. 72). In fact, many of the objects included in the queer intertextual commodity are incomplete without the audience’s active participation through queer gestures. These same gestures decenter the normative, incorporate LGBTQ+ representation—especially through the audience itself, and disidentify with capitalism by problematizing the ownership/authorship boundaries.

### 7.1 The Many Queer Gestures of The Underground

Though QIC’s vary in their effectiveness at negotiating capitalism and contributing to a larger post-millennial queer sensibility, the lessons they provide alert us to evolving tactics of

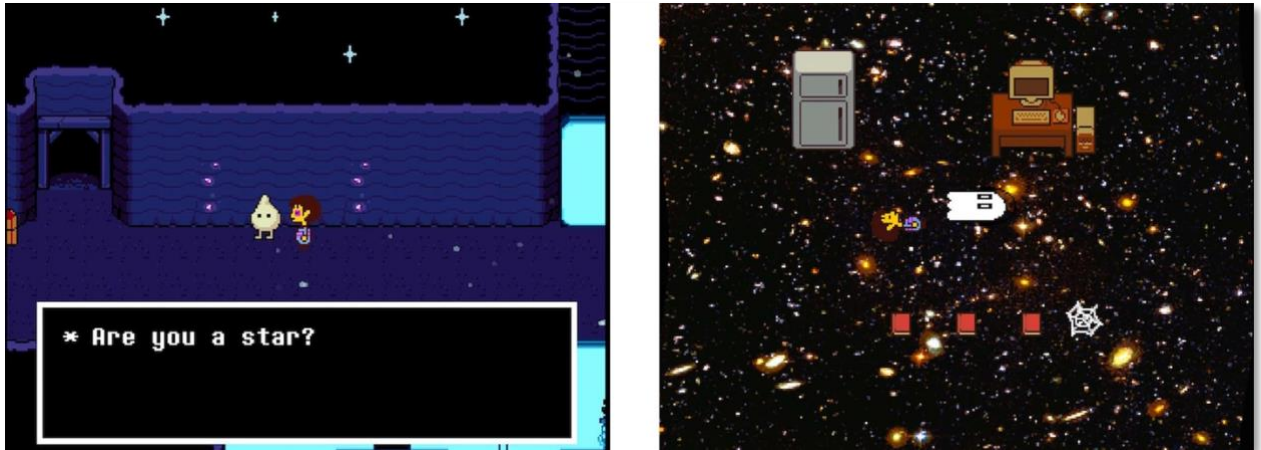
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<sup>54</sup> The pacifist ending of *Undertale* is colloquially known by fans as “the happiest ending?” with the question mark, as even the optimal ending includes a beloved character’s physical death. (The character survives without a body, which is actually an improvement for them.)

survival created by LGBTQ+ people in the digital age. These tactics or queer gestures advocate for practices that can be most effectively applied and have the greatest impact on the participants involved—perhaps even driving them to reconsider the naturalness of capitalism, take for example the video game *Undertale* (2015) designed by Toby Fox. This niche art game appeals to a variety of audiences using queer gestures, which makes it an excellent example to summarize the concepts presented in this study. *Undertale* is a single player role playing game designed using a turn-based battle mechanic. Despite its very traditional generic set-up it has used a pixel-art aesthetic, radical memory, ambiguous character design, and a laissez faire attitude towards licensing that embodies every aspect of the queer intertextual commodity.

Utilizing pixel-based art for the game was a distinctive (and at the time uncommon) choice for a modern game. Though this remediation could be attributed solely to cost-savings or to nostalgia for early video games, the pixel aesthetic provides a base-line visual that Bonnie Ruberg (2018) describes as “simultaneously nostalgic, exuberant, and absurdist” creating a tone that is “humorous but also sincere” (2.2). One of my study participants remarked that “*Undertale’s* graphics were low-fidelity, even utilizing a fairly small colour palette. It does a lot with a little. A carefully crafted, odd charm that is very appealing.” That mix of odd charm is created using an aesthetic that is usually familiar and even comforting in a way that is oft unnatural to the eye—a form of **remediation as a queer aesthetic**.

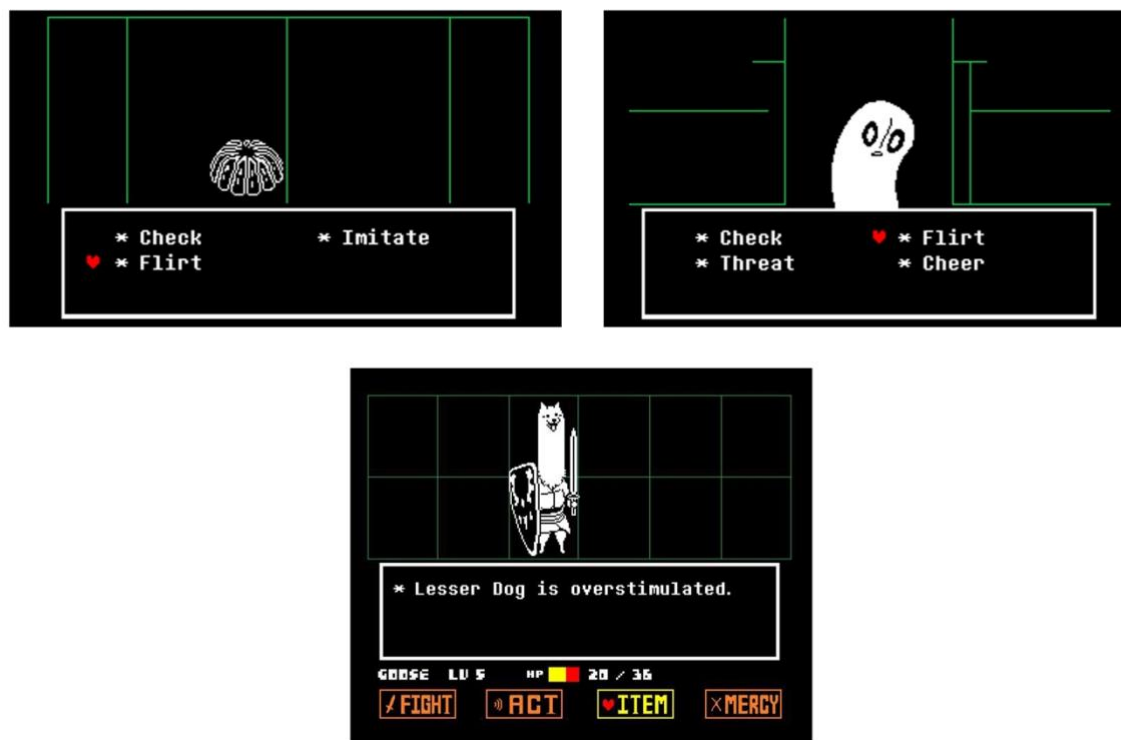




*Figure 7.1* Screenshots from a scene in Undertale.

You can see above a fairly standard 64-bit scroller image of Frisk (the player character) and one of the many “monsters” they interact with, Loren, who asks Frisk deep questions about stars and the universe. Ultimately, sending him on a bit of an acid-like trip with, Napstablook (second image), a depressed character. Having provided Napsterblook company you can exit the level (in a rare moment where all player paths converge).

*Undertale* as a video game is inherently **interactive**, however it goes beyond traditional player/game interaction by utilizing morality-based game mechanics in a battle designed game. Player choices in battle determine whether they are playing a run focused on utilizing the mercy mechanic in battle or what players have termed a no-kill, pacifist run or playing the battle RPG traditionally which means beating, often killing, opponents in battle or what is known as a genocide run. The battle mechanics are often quirky and utilize non-traditional forms of interaction with “monster” characters, in addition to mercy, you can pet, flirt, cry, and befriend to “win” a battle.



*Figure 7.2* Screenshots of battle mechanics throughout *Undertale*.

However, the game is designed to “guilt you, if you play it like a regular RPG” according to one study participant, “the morality system incentivizes you entirely through dialogue and emotions rather than gameplay rewards.” As you play, if you change from one style of interaction to another you may be moved into the “true neutral” ending of the game.

The guilt of the player through game mechanics connects *Undertale* to “empathy games” an emerging category of games designed to “forge empathetic connections between players and subjects” through perspective talking (Solberg, 2019). The term was initially coined by game designer Vander Caballero in 2012 for his game *Papa y Yo*.<sup>55</sup> All of my *Undertale*

<sup>55</sup> Empathy games are frequently used in classrooms for educational purposes with games like *This War of Mine* (11BitStudios), *Papers, Please!* (Lucas Pope), and *Project Syria* (Nonny de la Peña) to allow students to better understand the moral and emotional impact of war. Another subset of empathy games are designed as a moment of allyship between members of a minority, whether that minority is transwomen in *Dys4ia* (Anna Anthropy) or grieving parents who’ve lost a child in *That Dragon, Cancer* (Ryan Green). However, many game developers argue

focused participants remarked on the combined use of morality game mechanics and radical memory in some way, however, one participant eloquently described the emotional response to playing the game,

It was mind-blowing to experience for the first time and ultimately actively discouraged me from doing anything, but a true pacifist run through (although I did look up walkthroughs). I simply felt too guilty knowing the game “remembered” what I had done to it. Even resetting to play through another True Pacifist playthrough left me with uneasy negative feelings, like I was taking something from these characters.

The game truly encourages a non-violent player style; however, it is far more difficult to complete the game using non-violent tactics, a statement on violence more generally by the game the designer Toby Fox.

In addition to nontraditional battle styles and morality-based game mechanics the game utilizes radical memory in its programming. Almost all video games use normative persistent memory where a game remembers from one playing session to the next, essentially “bookmarking” your progress in save points, etc. until you return to play again. *Undertale* is no exception to this fundamental video game technology. However, it goes a step beyond utilizing radical memory creating permanent changes to the game’s code based on the player’s actions, such that a second play through of the game from a “true reset” will be of a modified game code created from your initial (or previous) playthroughs of the game. In *Undertale* if a player chooses to interact violently with the monsters, the game closes off the option of ever playing the pacifist run. Even if you reset the game, you can only change to a neutral path. Similarly, if you complete the game in pacifist mode you may never play a genocide run of the game. Upon first glimpse one could see the use of radical memory here as a way of requiring a second purchase from

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against the use of “empathy games” including Anthropy and Mattie Brice (*Mainichi*) as they believe it lets both players and mainstream game developers “off the hook” to make necessary cultural and production changes. (Bartelson, 2014; D’Anastasio, 2015; Solberg, 2019).

players if they want to play all three paths of the game. However, from all of my participants not a single one has opted to do so. The choice of run style being indicative of the personality and values of the player.

When a player chooses to reset the game for a second playthrough they will encounter “glitches” when they try to play in the opposite style as their previous games. Bonnie Ruberg (2018) describes this as “*Undertale* play[ing] with the queer glitch” as described by Jack Halberstam whereas the glitch “‘tears down’ the expectations and creates space for alternative ways of being in games (Halberstam, 2017, p. 197)” (2.7).



*Figure 7.3* A save file “glitch” in Undertale.

These apparent glitches are the game resisting the player based on the game’s previous experience with player. In addition to glitches characters will remember your previous decisions and proceed to guilt or judge you about killing them in previous playthroughs.



*Figure 7.4* Flowey passing judgment on Frisk as a player attempts to move from aggressive to pacifist play styles in second playthrough.

Holding grudges across iterations of the game. Or alternatively, if you have previous played with mercy, characters will treat you as an old friend when reintroduced in the subsequent playthroughs. The radical memory of the game means that though player's choices are limited by the design created by Fox, their choices have permanent and meaningful ramifications for that player's version of the game an essential element for intertextuality to be considered a queer gesture here.

The third queer gesture within the queer intertextual commodity is that of **unremarked self-representation** within the text. This can be just the canonical representation of LGBTQ+ characters played and created by members of the queer community. However, more often with the QIC this gesture includes audience self-representation in the text. With *Undertale*, we have both. There are major canonical monsters who are queer, including a lesbian couple Alphys and Undyne (a fan favorite ship); a transgender or genderfluid character Mettaton; and Papyrus is bisexual who can be “defeated” by taking him on a date. In fact, according to fans there are over 118 LGBTQ+ characters depicted in the game (undertaleqs, 2018).

However, it is the player character of Frisk who provides the most possibility for audience representation within the QIC as the avatar of the player. Unlike traditional RPG games players cannot pick their avatar, nor are they provided details about their player character beyond the name, their pixelated and ambiguous presentation in the game, and that they are a scared human child.



*Figure 7.5 Frisk character's "fall" into the Underground.*

*Undertale's* use of they/them pronouns for Frisk throughout the game can be interpreted in many ways by the player. From my study participants two main schools of thought emerged around the character of Frisk. The first is that Frisk is “not really a character but a projection of the player” a truly “blank slate” for the player to imbue with personality with their own, and as such Frisk gender changes based on the player's preference. Ruberg (2018) describes this interpretation as part of the “straightwashing” of *Undertale* by mainstream gamer audiences (2.2, 3.2). However, the ambiguity of the character allows anyone of any gender expression to identify with them, including gay and nonbinary players. The second camp views Frisk as a nonbinary, gender neutral or agendered character. One study participant stated,

Frisk is content to leave themselves undefined. They don't like to take on prescribed roles. Rather, they're more concerned with remaining reactive and responsive to the people in their lives [other characters]. Frisk is pure and raw potential, and their nebulous relationship with gender embodies that for me.

Viewing Frisk as nonbinary requires the player to put themselves in the position of being gender fluid, at least for gameplay, particularly in terms of a pacifist run where many of your nonviolent options rely on romantic overtures. Fox has refused to address Frisk's gender representation publicly and so like Cecil becomes a multiform character with multiple "true" canons.

Finally, Fox has leaned into cocreation using fan-made merchandising and crowdfunding as **alternative finance**. Unlike other examples presented here, Fox solely used crowdfunding to acquire start-up capital for the game as opposed to micropatronage more traditionally associated with the QIC. Unlike other crowdfunding initiatives the smallest donation tier guaranteed you a copy of the game, making this financing option more akin to early purchase than other crowdfunding initiatives, like the *Veronica Mars* movie where fans donate money for production and then still need to purchase the product separately. However, it is Fox's laissez-faire attitude towards fan-made merchandise and his IP that truly exemplifies alternative financing as a queer gesture.

In an effort for transparency and reciprocity with audiences, Toby Fox with the help of his lawyer drew up a blanket terms of agreement that individual players (not companies) to create and sell their own *Undertale* merchandise so long as it is not a copy of existing official merchandise, not sold in bulk to stores, does not use the trademarked logo, and is not impinging on the music's copyright as this is owned by someone else, though he does provide a link out for fans to acquire licenses from that copyright owner so they can sell their covers legally (Fox, 2016). Study participants noted that "the concessions for fan-based content production while excluding corporate production are perfect" and that "the impression I have is that Fox is less trying to control his IP and more trying to avoid unnecessary legal disputes." By providing clear, reasonable, and equitable guidelines for fans to produce content legally, content that they would

have created anyway, he has allowed fan artists selling comics, art prints, pins, and other merchandise the opportunity to move out of the grey market while still protecting his own interests. Encouraging fans to create new IP property that if not official or traditionally licensed is still afforded legitimacy and legal protections.

As we can see here with this mini-case study of *Undertale*, community authorship flourishes at the balance between queerness and capitalism. Study participants were asked how objects like *Undertale*, *Welcome to Night Vale*, and *Carmilla* were different from other LGBTQ+ media they've experienced. Here are some of the more common responses:

Often times the story structure tends to be a lot looser and free flowing, Tropes are more explicitly highlighted and then subverted... it is more concerned with the relationships one chooses to have, rather than the ones assigned to you by chance or birth.

It doesn't belong to the fans or the authors because ultimately the only way *Undertale* as a work of art exists is within the interaction *between* fan and author [emphasis original]. It's through audience engagement that the work becomes whole.

It becomes less about the RIGHT to have the final word on canonicity when we focus on authorship. It makes the text less static and more a thing in flux as both the author and the audience change and adapt their feelings about the work.

The queer intertextual commodity exists within and yet negotiates commercial structures to provide opportunities of collaboration that build trust, community, and authentic experiences for both audiences and creatives—a shared experience of the post-millennial queer sensibility felt by audiences and creatives alike.

As we can see in the *Undertale* example (and all of the texts presented here), the queer intertextual commodity encourages reciprocity and trust between traditional content creatives and audience-participants, such that a sense of community and shared ethics are formed. The morality-based game play of *Undertale* and the (mostly) unregulated use of the IP entrusted to fans showcase the dual nature of the QIC that requires both the text's content and its production



to reflect ethical collaboration. Further, queer intertextual commodities ask all participants, regardless of their position, to reflect on their relationship to the text and to teach other, centering LGBTQ+ identities and politics—including a healthy skepticism of capitalism. The post-millennial queer sensibility asks participants, both traditional creatives and audience contributors, to invest in a shared community founded in trust, mutual respect, and transparency.

## 7.2 Future for the Project

### 7.2.1 From Comics to VR, Future Texts

As we explore the possibilities of new media and its abilities to network fan communities and content creators, the development of transgressive collaboration to grow beyond post-millennial queer content, beyond independent media, and into more mainstream media texts becomes possible. The future of post-millennial queer as a concept will, like the texts that embody it, come from the minds and imaginations of their co-authors: audiences and creatives. During the course of this study over 82 individual media texts were identified by participants as belonging to the category of queer intertextual commodities and even more could be considered as embodying the post-millennial queer sensibility.

**Table 7.1** Participant Identified QICs

PODCAST	WEB SERIES	SOCIAL MEDIA	WEBCOMIC	GAMES
Alice isn't Dead	All4One	All4One	AJ & Magnus	A Place to Fuck Each Other
An Older Gay Guy Show	Barbelle	Carmilla	Always Human	<i>Authentically Us</i>
Contrapoints	BiFL	<b>Commonplace Books</b>	<b>Cartoonist of Color Database</b>	<b>Buried Without Ceremony</b>
Flame On!	Bond Girls	Gunnerkrig Court	Check, Please!	Cobra Club
Homophilia	Carmilla	Just Between Us	Demon of the Underground	Coming Out Simulator
King Falls AM	Clairevoyant	Queer as Fiction	Gunnerkrig Court	Curtain

PODCAST	WEB SERIES	SOCIAL MEDIA	WEBCOMIC	GAMES
Love and Luck	Coming Out	<b>QueerIt</b>	Homestuck	Deltarune
Monsters out of the Closet	Couple-ish	<b>Rainbow Family Tree</b>	Indigents	Dream Daddy
Pseudopod	FANTasies	Reddit Place	Long Exposure	Level with Me
Queer as Fiction	Féminin	<b>SCP Foundation</b>	Mage & Demon	<i>MindPalace</i>
Savage Lovecast	<b>Gay Women's Channel</b>		Minority Monsters	Mother 2
The Adventure Zone	Her Story		Never Satisfied	Night in the Woods
The Magnus Archive	<b>Kinda TV</b>		No End	One Shot
The Penumbra Podcast	<b>LezWatchTV</b>		<b>Queer Comics Database</b>	<i>Queerskins</i>
The Strange Case of Starship Iris	Life is Strange		The Stoop Gallants	Rennasistance
What the Het?!	<b>OPEN TV</b>		The Unsounded	<i>Through Darcella's Eyes</i>
Within the Wires	Queer Kids Stuff		Yaoi Biz	Undertale
WtNV	Queerios			<i>Virtual Drag</i>
	SKAM			
	Venice			

Virtual reality is in *italics*.  
 Hosting sites are **bolded**.  
 Realist content is highlighted in **blue**.

They include texts across a variety of mediums including web series, games, podcasts, comics, social media storytelling, and virtual reality (in italics). Additionally, participants highlighted media hubs that they believed hosted QIC content or more generally used a post-millennial queer sensibility (bolded). As you can see there is a lot of room for exploration of this growing and changing subset of media object/experiences. In particular, I plan on exploring the web comic *Homestuck* with its geo-cache game that canonically changed a main character from a cis to trans by audience intervention as well as virtual reality experiences *Queerskins* and *Virtual Drag*. One area that comparing additional texts will be helpful is in examining the similarities and

differences of queer gestures based on medium specific characteristics, an area only partially explored here.

### 7.2.2 *The Fantastical as Generically Specific to the QIC*

An additional area to be explored in the future of this project is the queer intertextual commodity's generic tendency towards the fantastical. Roughly 66% of the texts identified by participants as QICs belong to a sci-fi, fantasy, supernatural thriller, and conspiracist genres. The remaining 34% are highlighted in the table above in blue and belong to more mundane genres of talk show, sitcom, traditional drama, or they are experimental in nature like *Reddit Place*. Is the tendency towards the fantastical a reflection of the popularity of these genres in mainstream media? Or are these genres that historically have welcomed LGBTQ+ representation and therefore have a rich history of iconography and generic tropes to use and subvert? Finally, how does medium specificity and budget impact generic choice? Over a third of the mundane examples are from web series, which typically require a much larger budget for production generally that is only exponentially increased with special effects expected in more fantastical genres.

The case studies presented here are generally from the more fantastical genres represented in queer intertextual commodities. They share a similar aesthetic, tone, and though of different sub-genres and mediums they frequently address and subvert similar tropes, iconographies, and representational issues. In future, collecting a series of mundane generic QIC for comparison could be fruitful in finding the limitations of queer gestures, specifically unremarked representation and remediation as a queer aesthetic. That set of case studies would include *What the Het?!* (podcast), *FANtasies* (web series), *Queer as Fiction* (social media storytelling), *Check, Please!* (web comic), and the *Coming Out Simulator* (game).

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Afterword

#### *Queer Futurity: Heterotopia is Utopia*

Queer intertextual commodities by their very nature are messy, fluid, and perverse. Designed to “invite the multiplicity of fan authorship with all its contradictions as part of the ‘verse,’ embracing multiplicity and multidirectional authorship/readership as a given,” the QIC creates heterotopias or multiforms full of possibility (Stein, 2017, p. 76). Contradictory in nature the QIC uses gestures that change based on modality and medium, but are rooted in audience agency and a post-millennial queer sensibility. There is a glimpse of queer utopia in the messiness of life online.

I started this project with José Estaban Muñoz’s (2009) conceptualization of a queer utopia as an open horizon never reached—something to be yearned for but ultimately never achieved, at least not by us (pp. 21, 25-27). When I envisioned this horizon in my head it was of a calm sea with a clear sky, where I know that there is a space for us, somewhere “over there” where we can all exist together openly. However, Muñoz never saw a still sea, but one with stormy clouds and rough water. We sail on ships not designed for the journey ahead, ships that are being constantly rebuilt with the debris we find on the way—of those who never reached the opposite shore. The ships pick up survivors where they can, but far too many are lost in these waters. I’ve come to realize that the ships are *our* utopia. They are little worlds we build for ourselves, myriad and diverse, frequently perverse, and often impossible. Crewed by our families, our communities. There is not one queer utopia, one queer future, but more than can be imagined. Some fail and sink, but are no less perfect for their failure (Halberstam, 2011). Some may find their way to dry land once again, but most will forever roam on the horizon.

Queer intertextual commodities are boats on the sea, small slivers of a utopia glimpsed in the perverse heterotopia of cocreation. The post-millennial queer sensibility is an ocean current. The audience and creative workers are the crew struggling to stay afloat, hoping to pull even one more person out of the sea to survive another day.