

**THE ESTABLISHMENT, MAINTENANCE AND
DESTABILISATION OF FANDOM: A STUDY OF
TWO ONLINE COMMUNITIES AND AN
EXPLORATION OF ISSUES PERTAINING TO
INTERNET RESEARCH**

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I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with pedagogic practices in online fan communities. It reveals the strategies deployed in the formation, maintenance and destabilisation of online alliances and oppositions, and the patterns of consumption and identification with fan objects on these sites.

The thesis is based on longitudinal observation of forum activity on two sites, *Silent Hill Heaven* (a site for the *Silent Hill* series of videogames), and *City of Angel* (a site devoted to the television series *Angel*). A number of key ‘destabilising’ events are examined as critical cases. The thesis develops a theoretical language - “Social Activity Theory” (Dowling, 1998, in press) - to produce a ‘constructive description’ of the processes by which the activities, identities and relationships are institutionalised within these settings. The analysis is positioned within a critical engagement with fan studies and new-media research and draws from a number of theoretical antecedents in establishing a relational, de-essentialised approach to community, identity and pedagogy.

The analysis chapters examine different levels of activity and community/identity formation – revealing the maintenance of avatar identities, the configuration of the fan objects, modes of authority and in/exclusion, and the representation of ‘being a fan,’ on these sites. A number of continuities and discontinuities between the two settings are identified. Two analytical schemas for exploring the modality of nostalgia and identification within such settings are introduced.

This thesis presents an innovative approach to the analysis of fan activity as a pedagogic environment, and an extension of Dowling’s organisational language constituting an original contribution to theory. Methodologically, the thesis establishes a position that destabilises the opposition between online and offline research, presenting an analysis of online community-as-text which defines the avatar as the principal unit of analysis. In defining its ethical stance, the thesis also adds to the debate on online research ethics.

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT		3
CONTENTS		4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		8
CHAPTER 1	INTRODUCTION	9
CHAPTER 2	LITERATURE REVIEW	13
2.1	Introduction.	13
2.2	The relationship between popular culture and education.	14
2.3	The representation of fan productivity in fan studies literature.	17
	- Resistance and performance.	22
	- The skilled fan: The emphasis of competence within fan activity.	25
2.4	Norms, hierarchy and deviance: The representation of social practice in online communities and fan cultures.	31
	- The maintenance of good community relations.	32
	- Unequal settings: The formation of hierarchy.	34
	- Conflict and assaults: Destabilising events and activity.	37
2.5	Conclusion	41
CHAPTER 3	METHODS I	43
3.1	Introduction.	43
3.2	Research Design issues.	
	- Positioning my research in relation to ethnographic approaches to the Internet.	44
	- Contrasting cases.	47
3.3	Sampling issues.	
	- The selection of fan objects: <i>Angel</i> and <i>Silent Hill</i> .	49
	- The selection of contexts: COA and SHH.	54
	- The selection of posting activity from COA and SHH.	56
3.4	Data collection issues.	
	- Observation online.	61
	- The reliance on online data: The absence of speaking subjects.	64
	- Archiving.	66
3.5	The process of analysis.	68
3.6	Conclusion.	72

CHAPTER 4	METHODS II: ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING AN ETHICAL STANCE IN RELATION TO INTERNET RESEARCH	75
4.1	Introduction.	75
4.2	Localising ethical decision making.	76
4.3	In defence of covert observation.	83
	- Observation in public? The distinction between technical and perceived openness.	85
4.4	- Text or subject?	89
4.5	Conclusion.	92
CHAPTER 5	THE RECRUITMENT OF KEY CONCEPTS IN THE ANALYSIS OF COA AND SHH	95
5.1	Introduction.	95
5.2	Community.	96
	- Humanistic approaches to the concept of community in Internet and fan studies research.	97
	- Community as ‘practice.’	100
	- From ‘practice’ to ‘space.’	101
	- Community strategies on COA and SHH.	104
5.3	Identity.	106
	- Essentialising identity.	106
	- Cultural distinction and the strategic formation of identity.	107
	- De-essentialising identity.	111
	- Exploring identity in the context of COA and SHH.	113
5.4	Pedagogy.	115
5.5	Conclusion.	118
CHAPTER 6	IT’S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT: AVATAR IN/STABILITY AND THE MAINTENANCE OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS.	120
6.1	Introduction.	120
6.2	The in/stability of identities online.	122
6.3	The hacking of SHH	124
	- The return of the SHH forums.	127
	- Welcome back!	128
6.4	The closure of the COA forums.	131
	- The ‘Good old days.’	132
	- Establishing alliances within COA.	134
	- Looking to the future.	136
6.5	Conclusion.	139

CHAPTER 7	CONSTRUCTING THE OBJECT OF FAN AFFILIATION: MODES OF NOSTALGIA AND IDENTIFICATION.	143
7.1	Introduction.	143
7.2	Serial forms of entertainment and the challenges of ‘novelty-within-convention.’	145
7.3	Modes of Nostalgia	150
	- Modes of Nostalgia on SHH: <i>Silent Hill 4</i> .	151
	- Modes of Nostalgia on COA: <i>Angel</i> .	157
7.4	Modes of Identification	161
	- Modes of Identification on COA and SHH.	161
7.5	The discussion of two secondary texts.	170
	- <i>The Silent Hill</i> film.	170
	- <i>Serenity</i>	175
7.6	Conclusion.	177
CHAPTER 8	DECORUM IN THE FORUM(S): AUTHORITY, EXPERTISE AND SUBSERVIANCE.	180
8.1	Introduction.	180
8.2	Action and authority.	182
8.3	The organisational structure of COA and SHH.	184
8.4	Regulating activity: Modes of Authority and Moderation.	192
	- COA	192
	- SHH	198
8.5	Help-seeking activity and expertise.	202
	- Subservience and expertise in <i>Daddy Help Me!</i>	202
	- Asking for help – positioning subservience.	204
	- Identification and incredulity.	206
	- Forms of assistance and expertise.	207
	- The Adversary.	209
8.6	Conclusion.	214
CHAPTER 9	ON BEING A FAN: THE REPRESENTATION OF FAN IDENTITY IN DISCUSSION OF THE SAVE ANGEL CAMPAIGN AND THE SILENT HILL FILM.	217
9.1	Introduction.	217
9.2	The recontextualisation of fan objects/practice.	219
9.3	The representation of agency on COA and SHH.	222
	- COA	223
	- SHH	225
9.4	The construction of the other on COA and SHH: External threats.	228
	- COA	229
	- SHH	233
9.5	The negotiation of internal threats.	238
	- COA	238
	- SHH	240

9.6	Conclusion.	244
CHAPTER 10	CONCLUSION	247
10.1	Achievements of the research.	247
	- Theoretical and empirical achievements.	247
	- Methodological achievements.	250
10.2	Limitations of the research.	253
10.3	Future development.	255
10.4	Implications of the research.	256
APPENDICES		258
i.	Discussion of the “myth of emancipation” in the study of popular culture.	259
ii.	Summary of Internet activity surrounding <i>Angel</i> and <i>Silent Hill</i> .	261
iii.	Description of the <i>Hyperion</i> forums, COA, April 2005.	262
iv.	Description of the SHH forums, March 2005.	263
v.	Comment on the placement of Google Ads on SHH.	265
vi.	Description of the ‘Klingon forehead problem’ in <i>Star Trek: Deep Space Nine</i> .	266
BIBLIOGRAPHY		267
	A glossary of key terms is provided as a separate insert.	300

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This research is concerned with educational practice in the context of popular culture domains on the Internet. The celebration, analysis, and recontextualisation of media texts by fans has become increasingly visible in the move from real world settings and publications to ‘communities’ online, and has proved to be of increasing academic interest. This thesis presents an empirical study of two online fan communities which aims to further existing understandings of pedagogic activity within such settings. It also develops a theoretical language which has the potential to be recruited in the analysis of other empirical texts and environments, both online and off.

Two main questions are addressed. Firstly, I seek to explore the pedagogic strategies which are deployed in the maintenance of on-line fan cultures. These include the negotiation of social relationships and individual avatar identities, and related patterning of identification and engagement with the fan objects in such settings. My second question relates to the practice of online research. Drawing from literature relating to Internet-based research methods and my own experience during this study, the thesis seeks to explore the theoretical, methodological and ethical implications of conducting research in publicly accessible on-line communities.

My research is based on longitudinal observation of asynchronous communication on the forums of two Internet fan sites: *City of Angel* (COA), a site devoted to the US television series *Angel*,¹ and *Silent Hill Heaven* (SHH), a site devoted to the *Silent Hill* series of videogames. My original proposal for this work outlined an ethnographic study of an established fan community, with the stated intention to explore points of community inauguration around media events. In the early development of my work, I amended the design, selecting contrasting cases from distinct areas of fan activity. As I will discuss later in the thesis, this enabled the consideration of a range of theoretical issues, and the opportunity to explore the continuities and discontinuities between fan communities facing very different challenges. I also moved away from an ethnographic approach,² instead basing my analysis upon the textual analysis of online interactions.

¹ Itself a spin-off of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

² Although as I will suggest in Chapter 3, parallels can be drawn between my approach and ethnographic studies of the Internet.

This was due my increasing interest in the nature of posting activity within these settings. The interest in the phenomenon of community inauguration around media events has however been maintained, albeit in a somewhat different form, in my use of a number of empirical events as critical cases.

My research interests are addressed in different ways in following chapters. Throughout these, any terms of a technical or popular nature have been marked with an asterisk; this refers the reader to a glossary which is provided as a separate insert. The chapters are structured as follows:

In Chapter 2 I position my work in relation to three related areas of literature: educational work on popular culture texts/audiences, fan studies research, and literature on online communities. This discussion provides a broad contextual background to my own research, and flags a number of key issues which my analysis develops and extends. These include the consideration of negative as well as positive modes of engagement with media texts by fans, and the negotiation of authority and legitimacy within fan cultures and online communities.

In Chapters 3 and 4 my concern is with the operationalisation of this research project. The separation of this discussion into methods (Chapter 3) and ethics (Chapter 4) and the amount of attention given to these issues is due both to my second research question, and the importance of defining my position in what is still a relatively new field. In Chapter 3 I discuss *constructive description* (Brown and Dowling, 1998) as an approach to research, and outline the development of my own research design. Chapter 4 contains a defence of the ethical stance I have taken during my research. Each chapter contains a discussion of the methodological repercussions of the move from 'real' to 'virtual' spaces which is situated both within a consideration of the methodological literature, and in relation to the instability of my research settings. In each chapter I emphasise the continuities between on and offline research practice.

In Chapter 5 I introduce the sociological language, *Social Activity Theory* (Dowling, 2001a) which I have recruited and developed in my work. I also clarify my use of three key terms - community, identity and pedagogy - via reference to antecedent theory. My use of the term pedagogy is broader than the focus on the identification of types of

knowledge and productivity in some of the work on media fandoms, and includes the consideration of regulatory and de/stabilising moves within such settings. My focus on the configuration, rather than identification, of identity and community within these sites, involves a move away from humanistic concerns with the loss of the 'real' in the move from offline to online environments, towards exploring the strategies by which the idea of commonality (at both a group and individual level) is established within the activity on these sites.

The first of the analysis chapters, Chapter 6, explores the relationship between the maintenance of community relations and the stability of individual avatar identities. Responses to two events are explored: the hacking of SHH and the closure of the forums on COA. I argue that my analysis of the data supports existing work which has emphasised the expectation of authorial consistency by participants within online communities. I also, however, explore moments in which the inconsistency of avatar authorship emerges within interactions, and how these moments are dealt with.

Chapter 7 is also in some ways about in/consistency, but in relation to the fan objects rather than individual avatars. Here I examine the maintenance of affiliation with the fan objects on these sites in the face of contradictory textual material, or unwanted textual developments, starting with a discussion of the controversy surrounding *Silent Hill 4* on SHH. Two schemas - relating to modes of nostalgia and identification - are developed. These provide a language for examining the ways in which posters* work to close down potential fissures within the texts, and regulate the positions that can and cannot be taken in respect of the fan objects on these sites.

In Chapter 8, I move from a consideration of how posters talk about the fan objects to how they talk to (and about) each other. Dowling's modes of authority action schema (2004a, in press) is used to explore the range of claims to authority within the settings, and how these are tied into the maintenance of forms of identification with the fan objects. I also explore the regulation of deviance, the recognition of expertise, and the taking of subservient positions within these settings. Here the particular nature of the fan objects emerges as significant in the analysis, with the provision of gameplay assistance raising particular issues.

In the final analysis chapter, Chapter 9, I move from a consideration of the workings of the sites, to some idea of what the sites are about more generally by exploring the representation of what it is ‘to be’ a fan on COA and SHH. The empirical focus here is discussion of the “Save Angel” campaign and the *Silent Hill* movie. Each is presented as involving a recontextualisation of the objects/fan practice into more public spaces, an extension of the fans’ interest which draws in a range of external agents/sites into the discussion. The resulting forum activity is examined in relation to how fan identity is configured both in relation to the object text and also external objects. Tensions between being a ‘good fan’ and being a ‘good member’ of these sites are explored.

The analysis presented in these chapters is the result of a two year period of engagement with COA and SHH. The longitudinal nature of my study has allowed me to explore the maintenance of activity on these sites against a background of various external changes. These have included the release of a new *Silent Hill* game, and the hacking of SHH, the cancellation of *Angel*, and the closure of the COA forums. This thesis sets the exploration of the pedagogic strategies within the forum activity on these sites in relation to such developments. My focus has primarily been on the career of the settings rather than individual members, although individual members are examined at different points of the analysis. As will be seen, these careers have included points of crisis and upheaval, as well as excitement.

A central issue in this thesis is the identification of the ways in which sentimental affiliation is regulated via a range of pedagogic strategies in these settings. This affiliation can be seen to be established in relation to different elements of the practice; the fan objects, the sites, and more broadly, the idea of ‘being a fan.’ The policing of patterns of consumption and identification on COA and SHH are strongly tied into the evaluation of legitimate identities within these settings. I will suggest that the nature of this patterning provides one of the key markers of difference between the two settings.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INTRODUCTION

My aim in this chapter is to provide a contextual background to the research presented in this thesis. In the terms defined by Brown and Dowling (1998, 140), this is an attempt to define the *problematic* through reference to existing empirical research in two broad areas: the study of media fans within media and cultural studies, and the study of online communities across the social sciences.

My concern here is with providing a broad outline of the fields to which my research relates. Further literature will be recruited and introduced in the chapters relating to methods (Chapters 3 and 4), and in the delineation of my analysis (Chapters 6-9). These chapters will include references to somewhat controversial sources of information, including online dictionaries and encyclopaedias such as Wikipedia. Such sites have clear limitations; because of the way they are authored they cannot be relied upon to provide the rigour that one might expect from an academic publication. The nature of my research interest - related to empirical practices not yet well documented in more conventional forms of academic production – means however, that such sites have on occasion served as useful resources.

In engaging with the literature from these fields, I aim to provide an introduction to the contemporary research context in the theoretical areas relating to my research. At the same I hope to suggest the historical development of this work. Consideration of this development is valuable as it situates my study within wider and long-established concerns. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of a number of key moves in the educational study of popular culture and texts; these introduce a range of questions and concerns which have direct relevance to work in the field of fan and games studies, and to my own research. I then explore the literature on fans (Section 2.3), and online environments (Section 2.4).

2.2 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POPULAR CULTURE AND EDUCATION

Despite regular panics over the negative influence of popular culture on the young, over the past 40 years educationalists have demonstrated increasing enthusiasm for ‘the popular.’ With the expansion in the scale and scope of digital technologies, and the development of new disciplines such as game studies, this interest has become increasingly evident. The 2005 *Computers and Learning* (CAL’05) conference “*Virtual Learning?*” for example, opened with a keynote ‘conversation’ between James Gee and Henry Jenkins, entitled “Why Videogames are good for your soul.” This conversation contained a number of direct challenges to teachers and traditional education based on a comparison of popular culture texts/practices and traditional educational practices. Whilst popular culture was presented as exciting, complex and challenging, school-based education was characterised as dull, uninvolved and uninspiring. The central challenge presented to educationalists was the need to look to the popular and learn from it; to begin to reinvigorate ‘outdated’ modes of teaching and learning in the classroom by taking seriously those practices going on in settings beyond the school gates – settings in both ‘real’ and, increasingly, in online domains. This emphasis on the popular and the need for new approaches saw Gee and Jenkins suggesting that research examining teaching and learning in the context of gaming and popular cultural production might suggest new educational approaches. The educational spotlight, they argued, should be shone on the spaces in which (predominantly young) people now choose to spend time learning, playing and arguing, spaces with no ‘teachers’ in sight.

Despite the ‘revelatory’ nature of this presentation, interest in the “wider ecology of education” (Sefton-Green, 2004) is not new. The status and value of popular practices has long been a contested issue. Wranglings over the legitimacy and usefulness of out-of-school practices could, for example, be seen in the high/low culture debate in the sociology of education in the 1970s.³ Three broad developments within educational research can be identified. The first is a broadening of academic focus from elite texts and school-based practices to the study of popular texts and exploration of ‘everyday’

³ One example of this is John Spradberry’s 1976 paper on an (unsuccessful) attempt to integrate the mathematical knowledge involved in the informal practice of pigeon-keeping into the classroom. The main finding was the students’ resistance to the incorporation of their hobbies into a formal teaching and learning context.

and informal activities which has been part of wider moves towards democratising education. David Buckingham's description of the history of media education in the UK since the 1930s, describes a (relative) broadening of cultural acceptability and loosening of the protectionist import of traditional media education (see Buckingham, 1998, Kellner, 2002). This involved a move from the elitism of media education's Leavisite origins, via increasing interest in the lived culture of children and attempts to move beyond moral panics in respect of ideologically dangerous texts, to the examination and recognition in the 1970/80s of the complexity of "the ways in which children make judgments about the media, and how they use the media to form their personal and social identities" (Buckingham, 1998, 37). Such interest led to the study of media-related activities in domestic environments and out of school clubs (see Buckingham, 2003), and increasingly, the production of localised, "culturally-sensitive" approaches to literacy (Street, 2003) and media use.

A second move has involved a growing academic interest in media production. Again, this work has precedents. In their paper "Digital Visions: Children's 'Creative' Uses of New Technologies," Julian Sefton-Green and David Buckingham (1998) establish the continuity of this interest via reference to earlier accounts of the creative productivity of young people, including Paul Willis's examination of music making and fanzine production in *Common Culture* (see 1998, 63). The growing availability of new technologies (and with them, the ease of content creation (Livingstone, 2004)), has however, resulted in increased interest in the production of texts across a range of media. This focus on production can be seen to relate to "recent developments in literacy research, which emphasise that, with the spread of modern technologies, verbal language is no longer the primary symbolic system" (Pelletier, 2005, 1).

The third development – which has more direct relevance for my own work - is a move from 'real world' to online sites of practice. This interest is evident in attempts to develop formal pedagogic sites online (within the context of distance education for example), and conversely, the study of existing informal Internet-based environments. Here, the influence of Lave and Wenger's (1991) "communities of practice" model has been increasingly influential; this will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Examples of studies of ‘informal learning’ within computer-mediated environments include the exploration of children and teenagers involvement in chatrooms (Sefton-Green, 2003, Sefton-Green and Willett, 2003; Greenfield and Subrahmanyam, 2003); the use and production of websites (Guzzetti, 2006); and children’s collaborative and problem solving activity within role playing communities (Thomas, 2005). This work can be regarded as an extension of earlier studies of online environments such as MOOs,* MUDs,*⁴, and usenet* newsgroups.⁵ However - unlike this earlier work which has often focused entirely on online interactions – studies of children’s practices online have tended to root their analyses within offline contexts. Sefton-Green and Willett’s (2003) study of participation within the Habbohotel chatroom, for example, was based upon participant observation within the cybercafé in which children were playing (online). The focus remained on children’s offline talk and interaction; the children’s playful or dangerous online behaviour was approached from a perspective which remained focused on the child-as-subject. The move to solely engaging with online avatars, rather than physically embodied subjects, raises a range of methodological and theoretical issues which this thesis explores.

The development of ‘new’ and ‘multi’ literacies approaches (see Kellner, 2002; Gee, 2003; Lankshear and Knobel, 2003, 2004; Livingstone, 2004) during this period of development can be seen to be linked to the “demands of new technologies and popular cultures” (Luke and Elkins, 2000). These technologies have been positioned as insisting upon particularly skilled responses. As the tone of Jenkins’ and Gee’s conversation at CAL’05 demonstrated however, this work has often appeared to fetishise technology, fetishise popular culture texts, and fetishise those who have been presented as masters of the new popular domains - children.⁶ The celebratory tone of some of this work has, however, raised questions about the impartiality of emerging disciplines such as games studies and fan studies. This work is frequently couched in language which perpetuates what Dowling has termed the “myth of emancipation” (1998, 15). Dowling introduces this in relation to the practice of ethnomathematics, where the myth is founded upon the revelation of “the truly mathematical content of

⁴ E.g. Reid, 1994; Bruckman and Resnick, 1995; Curtis, 1997; Kendall, 2000, 2002; Curtis, 1997.

⁵ See Tepper, 1997; Denzin, 1999.

⁶ As, for example “screenagers” (Rushkoff, 1996) and cyberkids (Valentine and Holloway, 2002). See Buckingham (2000) for discussion of the move from ‘dystopian’ to ‘utopian’ representations of the relationship between children and technologies.

what might otherwise be regarded as primitive practices,” a move which “elevates the practices and, ultimately, emancipates the practitioners” (Dowling, 1998, 15; see Appendix i. for further discussion of this). Similar moves have been visible in relation to the study of popular culture; in media and cultural studies research, and in particular in work on fans and videogames.

2.3. THE REPRESENTATION OF FAN PRODUCTIVITY IN FAN STUDIES LITERATURE

My interest in this section is in the ways that the substantive productivity of fan/consumer alliances has been recontextualised by academics in the construction of value-added descriptions of fan identity and activity - for example Jenkins’ statement that ‘fandom’ has always been a “knowledge culture” (Jenkins, 2002). It is not my intention here to provide a lengthy history of media fandom. It is, however, worth providing some idea of the evolution of the field, and to suggest the range and breadth of the sites of fan activity explored.

The literature which can be gathered under the label ‘fan studies’ (but whose disciplinary alignments, like the fan interests documented, are by no means homogenous), contains varying conceptualizations of the nature of this knowledge and this culture. A characteristic feature of much of this research, however, is a focus on the agency of fans.

This work can be regarded as a development of the “active audience” model which emerged in the 1980s; for example in the work of John Fiske (1987). Fiske’s description of television as a “producerly” text which treats audiences as active readers - “members of a semiotic democracy, already equipped with the discursive competencies to make meanings and motivated by pleasure to want to participate in the process” (Fiske, 1987, 59) - represented a significant break from previous media effects models. The most restrictive of these - the “hypodermic needle model” of mass communication – has for example been described by Virginia Nightingale as presenting “pejorative evaluations of the audience as the narcotised, lobotomised and powerless masses” (Nightingale, 1996, 7). In the context of such models, Nightingale describes how:

The idea of the 'active audience' was initially considered radical. It enlarged the audience research agenda by including everything from attitudes and motivations, to actions and speech, to the generation of ideas and meanings. (Nightingale, 1996, 7)

The focus on the autonomy of the 'active' audience has, however, been criticised from a number of directions. In a review of Curran, Morley and Walkerdine's *Cultural Studies and Communications (1996)*, Daniel Chandler notes the number of ways in which Fiske is challenged by the editors, describing how:

Hostilities break out as early as page 3, where Fiske is identified as the prime example of the 'regrettable' 'inanity of cultural studies' 'uncritical (or "pointless") populism' in celebrating 'rituals of resistance' which are described here as 'no more than over-romanticized celebrations of an illusory form of consumer sovereignty' (Chandler, 1997, no page nos.).

The central criticism here - the overly celebratory nature of Fiske's model of audience activity - is one that has been levelled at fan studies research, which has on occasion taken such celebration to extremes.

Early work on television fandom was defined by a number of key publications. These included two books published in 1992: Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*, and Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women*. There are a number of similarities between these two texts, each of which is described by the author as 'ethnographic' in design (although Bacon-Smith's appears more traditional in respect of this label; see Chapter 4), and each describing a largely female fan base. Whilst Bacon-Smith's work focused primarily on *Star Trek* fans and documented her own progression into this culture, Jenkins' presented a more general theory of the "fan's characteristic mode of reception" (1992, 53). Jenkins' draws from de Certeau's work in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988) - in particular the conceptualisation of reading as "textual poaching," and readers as nomads - and presents a model of fans as tactical media poachers.⁷ The fans Jenkins describes (who are affiliated to a range of texts) are presented as being only a small segment of a broader mass audience, a sub-group engaged with appropriating and transforming media texts in the construction of their own cultures.

Since the 1980s, researchers have explored and documented a variety of such cultures. These have varied both in terms of the objects of fan interest, and the nature of fan productivity presented. This work has not been restricted to the practices of television fans. It has included studies of fandom relating to football (Redhead, 1997; Brown

⁷ de Certeau's theoretical approach to practice had also been an important influence on Fiske's work. For discussion of the use of de Certeau's theory within fan studies see Hills, 2004, and Sandvoss, 2005.

1998; Sanvoss 2001), literature (e.g. Green and Guinery, 2004), popular music (Hinerman, 1992; Joyrich, 1993; Cavicchi, 1998), comic books (Putz, 1999; Brooker, 2000), 'retail coupon and product refund' fans (Classen, 1998), and radio serials (Thomas, 1992).

Since the mid 1990s, fan researchers have increasingly focused on Internet-based fan activity. Nancy Baym's study of the usenet* newsgroup rec.arts.tv.soap (r.a.t.s) (2000) - a group devoted to the US soap opera *All My Children* - is perhaps one of the most significant studies of online fandom. Baym was the first to provide an in-depth longitudinal exploration of the workings of an online fan community. A variety of fan interests have since been explored, but as in earlier work, the fandoms surrounding certain television series have proved particularly popular sites of investigation. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)* (Gatson and Zweerink, 2002, 2004a, 2004b; Williams, 2004), *The X-Files* (Wakefield, 2001; Bury, 2003a, 2003b, 2005), and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Boese, 1996; Pullen, 2000) have generated a great deal of academic interest, to some extent usurping the earlier popularity of *Star Trek* fandom as an object of academic interest (in, for example, Jindra, 1994, 1999; Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995; Penley, 1997).

As well as exploring new empirical permutations of fandom online and evaluating their relationship to pre-Internet practices, this period has been marked by more general re-assessments of the field of fan studies and development of fan theory in theoretically, rather than empirically, driven publications. Recent examples of this are Matt Hills' *Fan Cultures* (2002), and Cornel Sandvoss's *Fans* (2005). Milly Williamson's *The Lure of The Vampire* (2005) also contains useful critical discussion of fan studies research in relation to her own empirical work.

In contrast to the numerous works on television fans, less has been written on videogames fans; the work that does exist has been largely excluded from the recent critiques by Hills and Sandvoss. A distinction can be made here between the study of online gaming (including MMORPGs*) and the practices of fans of console or pc games. Whilst the former has recently received a great deal of attention, particularly from educationalists, somewhat less attention has been paid to the use of the Internet by fans of console or pc games (examples include Flanagan, 1999, Consalvo 2003a, 2003b; Rehak, 2003; Newman, 2004; Crawford, 2006). Whilst the development of gaming

cultures online is being explored in relation to socialization and cognition (Taylor, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2005), literacy (Squire and Steinkuehler, in press), and identity formation/embodiment (Taylor, 2002, 2004), the relationship between individual console-based gameplay and participation in Internet-based fan communities remains relatively unexplored.

As in the media education research outlined in the previous section, the identification of skilled practices within fan activities has underpinned political manoeuvres within fan studies research. This has served to fend off the characterisation of fans in terms of “social and psychological pathology” (Jenson, 1992). Here too, technology has been presented as driving the expansion and reach of this textual production; enabling distanced communication and new modes of creativity. Constance Penley for example describes how in the early 1990s, “along with the zine* publishing apparatus,” VCR technology served as “the lifeblood” of slash* fandom, “enabling fans to copy and swap episodes” (Penley, 1991, 146). A vast range of creative activity is presented from this pre-Internet period; including fanfiction writing, filking,* fan art, cos-play,* the production of criticism and commentary, and the publication of print-based fan zines.* With the development of digital technologies these examples have been extended to incorporate digital production. Examples include: web page production (Pullen, 2000); short-film production (such as the fan-made ‘web movie’ “*George Lucas in Love*” see Brooker, 2002, Jenkins 2002); the creation of machinema* (see Jenkins, 2002; Jones, 2006); and skins* and game avatars (Jenkins, 2002).

Sandvoss has suggested that in focusing on such productivity, fan scholars have presented an overly narrow definition of fandom. He argues that “ethnographies of tight-knit, textually productive fan communities” (Sandvoss, 2005, 30) such as those by Bacon-Smith and Jenkins have a skewed focus, limited to “only those actively participating in fan communities through conventions and meetings and textual production” (ibid). He claims that:

many viewers and readers who do not actively participate in fan communities and their textual productivity nevertheless derive a distinct sense of self and social identity from their fan consumption. (ibid)

Here, Sandvoss is making reference to textual productivity, one of the modes of audience production identified by Fiske. Fiske suggests that audience production can be

divided into three types; “semiotic” (relating to meaning making) “enunciative” (communicative productivity relating to, for example, talk and dress, see Gregson, 2005) and “textual” (the substantial productivity of audiences), noting that whilst all:

popular audiences engage in varying degrees of semiotic productivity [...] fans often turn this semiotic productivity into some form of textual production that can circulate among – and thus help to define – the fan community. (Fiske, 1992, 30)

By suggesting that fan scholars have over-emphasised those fan practices that manifest themselves in producing textual and cultural works, Sandvoss here seeks to expand the definition of what fan activity can entail. In these terms, the focus on forum discussion within my own research (like that of scholars such as Nancy Baym) focuses on a somewhat hybrid form of production - textually rendered *enunciative* productivity, which I refer to throughout the thesis as *posting activity*.

Having briefly suggested the range of contexts and activities documented in this literature, I am now going to explore the ways in which the productivity of fans has been approached and interpreted by fan researchers. In doing so I want to suggest two different ways in which the work can be distinguished. Firstly, a distinction can be made between work that emphasises the resistant nature of fan engagement/productivity, and work that suggests that fan activity demonstrates skilled practices that challenge the distinction between formal and informal pedagogic practices.

A second distinction can, however, be made between how these two approaches tend to ‘read’ fan productivity. The first approach focuses its attention on individual *performances* within fan cultures, whereas the second reveals the *competences* inherent within fan activities. This distinction between competence and performance - as defined by Dowling (2005a)⁸ - serves to focus attention on the way in which fan production has been recruited and interpreted by academics. Sensitivity towards the moves within this literature is essential due to the way that fans and their practices have occasionally been celebrated in this work.

⁸ A related distinction is also made by Basil Bernstein in relation to competence and performance pedagogies (Bernstein, 1996). Competence models are presented as focusing on the learner and their individual progress, and performance models prioritising the text, the contents of which, rather than being considered (as in competence model) “as an expression of the author’s development,” “can be objectified into the range of skills it is taken to represent” (Moss, 2002, 553). Bernstein is interested in differing emphases in different types of pedagogic models rather than focusing solely on the text. Because of this, the gaze in each case constitutes an institutionalised approach.

This differentiation resonates with a number of theoretical antecedents including Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* (1916/1974). In the way I am using it, the distinction relates to the degree in which the reader recruits institutionalised norms and categories in their reading of the text, or remains at the level of the individual utterance (as performance) (Dowling, 2005a). The emphasis on performance constructs a reading which "is reliable with respect to an individual, but does not generalise to a broader category" (2005a, no page nos.). Here the specificities of the individual performance are of central concern, particularly in terms of the newness that the performance marks. This may involve the reification of individual/authorial will. In contrast, an emphasis on competence involves the recognition of:

the deployment of a skill, which is to say, the realisation of an attributed competence—attributed, that is, in and by the establishing of an emergent regularity of practice. (Dowling, 2005a, no page nos.)

Competence is evaluated in relation to institutionalised frameworks (of criteria, categories etc), and must be acquired/learnt. The analytical distinction between competence and performance does not involve essential features or states. Instead it here provokes consideration of what is being privileged in the descriptions of fan activity within this literature. As I will suggest, tensions reside in those descriptions which appear to privilege either competence or performance.

RESISTANCE AND PERFORMANCE

An emphasis on resistant performance can be seen in academic readings of the sexually explicit genre of fanfiction - slash.* Slash has been presented as involving the subversive appropriation and reconfiguration of mainstream texts to suit individual desires (see for example Penley, 1992, 1997; Cicioni, 1998⁹). Whilst the development of genres of slash and other fanfiction represents a degree of institutionalisation (as I will discuss in the next section), the emphasis has to some extent been on slash fictions as deterritorialising¹⁰ performances.

A similar extension and re-working of fictional material has been documented by those studying the activities of videogame fans. Mary Flanagan, for example, has described

⁹ For more recent work on slash see Woledge, 2005; Busse, 2006; Stasi, 2006.

¹⁰ Here I am recruiting Deleuze and Guattari's (2003) use of this term.

the fragmentation and pluralising of versions of Lara Croft through individual acts of fan authorship in the production of various life-histories for Lara. She describes “six or seven million fans” creating “regional narratives of the hero in what ends up being localized oral, written, and pictorial histories” (Flanagan, 1999, 81). Here, the focus on the individual texts-as-performance are presented in terms that emphasise acts of authorship and imagination, but also the personalising and customising of Lara around particular interests/desires.

The description of such creativity has been tied into political moves to demonstrate the resistant nature of the active audience; the ability to meld and transform textual material into tailored, personalised fantasies, identifications, and pleasures. In the work on television fans, the audience involved in this resistant work has been predominantly female, presented as channelling energies into the reconfiguration of popular culture texts in order to satisfy aspects of life, or fantasies which are not provided by official producers. Here fan practices are “interpreted as symbolic resistance” (Schroder et al, 2003, 42), presented as empirical examples of the sort of localised gap-grabbing and foundation questioning that Judith Butler calls for in *Bodies that Matter* (1993). This work constructs fan agency as reacting to, or removed from, the oppression of the ‘system.’ Fan practices are thus aligned with the political impetus of other subordinated groups, particularly for example, the interests of feminism. Early influences include Janice Radway’s (1984a, 1984b) ethnographic study of the readers of “Littleton”; the description of romance readers’ production of a space to escape the confines of domestic life through their reading practices. This idea is echoed in other work, such as Chad Dell’s description of female fans of professional wrestling in 1940s and 1950s. Their fandom is presented as offering “female audiences a context in which to rebel against this [patriarchal] definition [of femininity] and in which to create their own” (Dell, 1998, 97).

A similar vision of female empowerment is found in Cinda Gillilan’s (1998a) “interpretative analysis” of the female fandom of *War of the Worlds*. This fandom is presented as an example of the “wild zones” within which “women can take control of cultural products that would otherwise fall outside their influence” (Gillilan, 1998a, 185). A similar mediation is seen in Sara Jones’s (2000b) description of *Xena* fans as “revisionist historians” carrying out the “reformulation and reclamation” of the

Amazonian figure. Jones suggest that *Xena* serves as a ‘nexus’ for feminist activity, describing how its fans incorporate their own marginalised positions into the “grand narrative of history” through acts of localised recontextualisation on Internet sites.

The focus on performance in the discussion of videogames has taken a somewhat different form. Gamers have typically been presented in different terms from television fans; this distinction has often had gendered connotations. Thus an early *Rolling Stone* article on “Spacewar Nuts” (Brand, 1972), presented gaming fandom as closely tied to the institutionalisation of scientific research, rather than domestic settings. The subversive and creative productivity of gamers has been presented in ways that emulate the rhetoric surrounding hackers; the emphasis on their mastery of technology, but also a particular degree of intervention upon the textual material. This is seen in Anne-Marie Schleiner’s description of game modders*’ interventions as offering; “an unexpected perversion of the accepted semiotics of game worlds and game play” (Schleiner, 2003, no page nos.). In another paper on the production of mods,* Cindy Poremba suggests that:

By creating game artefacts, players are recognized as authors of new objects and contexts that are significant, expressive and instantiate their agency. (Poremba, 2003, no page nos.)

Erkki Huhtamo’s earlier work on game patch* artists situates this particular form of textual productivity within a history of what he calls “tactical media”:

a new way of ‘talking back’ to the media, of engaging in a creative destructive conversation with the activities and the products of industrial media culture. (Huhtamo, 1999, no page nos.)

Such “talking back” is presented as involving the penetration, appropriation, and modification of dominant forms of media culture by unsanctioned producers, who then hurl “the mut(il)ated creations back onto the public arena of mainstream media.” (ibid). The distinction between sanctioned texts/practices and unsanctioned interventions within this work, and interest in tactical moves, clearly resonates with the description of fan practices relating to traditional media, and shares similar theoretical inspirations (de Certeau’s (1988) distinction between strategies and tactics proving a driving influence). This work also contains the recognition of alignments between fans and official producers – just as fanfiction writers have moved into the publishing industry (see Williamson, 2005), game modders* are presented as working their way into the games industry, or openly encouraged in their endeavours by the release of source code by software companies (see Schleiner, 2003).

THE SKILLED FAN: THE EMPHASIS OF COMPETENCE WITHIN FAN ACTIVITY

As I suggested in my reference to the development of genres of fanfiction, the distinction between competence and performance can be destabilised. Work on the institutionalisation of fan fiction within fan cultures, for example, has explored the development of frameworks from which authorial competence can be recognised. Examples include Jenkins' work on "The Formulaic Structure of Slash" in *Textual Poachers* (1992; see also Cicioni, 1998), and work on genres which describe the regularity of recognisable features within sub-divisions of fanfiction production. These include: Penley (1992) on hurt/comfort* fiction; Bacon-Smith (1984) and Pflieger (1999) on the mary sue* genre; and McLelland (2000) on "boy-love" fiction in manga fandom.

Educationalists interested in 'new' and 'multiliteracies' have demonstrated increasing enthusiasm for fan fiction writing. Different elements of this production have been explored. These include: the development of literacy practices within such authorship (Alvermann and Hagood, 2000; Chandler-Olcott and Mahar, 2003); evidence of peer support for second-language-learning within fanfiction communities (see Black, 2004, 2005, 2006); and the institutionalisation of peer review - also known as beta reading - within some communities (see Karpovich, 2006).

Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel's (2004) paper, *New Literacies: Research and Social Practice*, provides one example of how fanfiction production has been approached in this way. The authors present an extract of a student's fanfiction, noting how much it reveals about the student's "literacy proficiency":

At a surface level it is evident that he has a competent grasp of a range of important writing conventions. These include compiling lists, paragraphing, direct speech conventions, punctuation, and controlling the genre structure of a narrative. (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004, no page nos.)

The authors situate this reading within an anecdote in which the student's teacher failed to recognise the 'value' within the fanfiction. They cite her response: "It doesn't even make sense!" The fiction, and the teacher's response to it, is presented as "[revealing] a most unfortunate teaching and learning situation" (Lankshear and Knobel, 2002).

Lankshear and Knobel present themselves as able to look beyond the problematic nature of the individual (rather than curricularised) performance. They argue that:

Even a cursory glance at Tony's text reveals to anyone with relevant insider knowledge that he has produced a complex intertextual narrative. (ibid)

Lankshear and Knobel present the teacher as excluded from this “insider knowledge”; the teacher responds to the fiction as an inappropriate performance because she fails to recontextualise it appropriately. In the terms I am using however, both the teacher and Lankshear and Knobel are taking a competence approach to the evaluation of the student’s story. Each is judging the work in relation to different criteria.

Lankshear and Knobel’s aim here is to reveal the educational potential of informal fan practices, and to identify the markers of literacy practices (as competences) within such productivity. They approach the fiction from a particular framework, emphasising its linguistic content, and revealing the range of writing skills that it demonstrates. In work within media/cultural studies, the identification of the skilled competence within fan practices has often been suggested in more general terms. One key strategy by which this has been done, is by promoting the similarity between fan practices and those of academics.

The affinity between academic and fan is often presented in somewhat abstract terms, constructed in reference to shared expertise, similar engagement with reading and criticism, and similar concern with the ‘exchange of knowledge’ and the production of texts. Often, as Sandvoss (2005) has noted, these serve to maintain the superiority of the academic as interpreter; it is the academic who is able to reveal the competence within the practice. Moves to classify typologies of practice can be found (Jones’ (2000b) classification of forms of knowledge in *Xena: Warrior Princess* fandom, for example), but frequently fans and academics are presented as similarly specialist interest groups that just happen to be working in slightly differing registers (and with differing cultural status). Jenkins has, for example, referred to the intellectual capital that fans “carry around” with them noting that; “They are very good critics; they are very good theorists” (Hills and Jenkins, 2001, no page nos.), stating that: “I would say that academic theory-production is simply one subcultural or institutional practice among many” (ibid).

This quote is taken from a point in a discussion between Jenkins and Hills where they are discussing the work of Thomas McLaughlin – specifically McLaughlin’s description of “vernacular theory” (1996). This has been presented as providing fan scholars with a language for describing the nature of popular pedagogy. McLaughlin roots the vernacular in the practices of those without “cultural power”; those who speak in a language grounded in local concerns (McLaughlin, 1996, 5). He suggests that the vernacular is experienced in flashes/moments and presents examples of “sites and instances of vernacular theory” (30) including fanzine production. He compares these flashes with what he regards as the elite, systematic, sustained (totalising) theory of academia. In doing so, he argues that the differences between the vernacular and the academic are in some ways superficial, concluding that:

distinctions between academic and vernacular have more to do with status and style and scholarly rigor than with the goals and strategies of these practices. (6)

Here again, we find an emancipatory undercurrent; a democratising move to suggest that fans and academics share a common source.

Such claims can be related back to earlier work on the consumption of popular texts. The description of popular fiction readers in the studies of reading groups by Radway (1984) and Elizabeth Long (1987) was, for example, based on an explicit move to democratise and pluralise literacy practices. Radway rejected the partial literacy “ignorance model” in favour of the idea that “Different interpretive communities may actually be differently literate” (Radway, 1984, 53). This democratising move was also seen in Long’s work, including her description of reading group participants as “the good schoolchildren of our culture” (1987, 314).

Within fan studies research, references to literacy have generally been replaced with the idea of ‘knowledge’ and references to a range of fans ‘intellectual’ practices. By tracking the development of a theory of fandom within the work of Henry Jenkins, it is possible to examine the trajectory of such ideas. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins describes fandom as a “discursive logic”; “a specific set of subcultural practices that straddle multiple texts” (Hills and Jenkins, 2001, no page nos.). Fandom is presented as an approach to texts which Jenkins demonstrates by outlining types of fan productivity. These are presented as demonstrating the tactical (creative and critical) practices of fans and serve to configure them as readers, writers, critics and artists.

By the time of his “concrete case study” (Jenkins, 1995, 53), of the practices/perceptions of the usenet* group alt.tv.twinpeaks, Jenkins’ theoretical concepts are not borrowed (or ‘poached’) from de Certeau but from Sherry Turkle’s work on hackers in *The Second Self* (1984). Jenkins focuses on the expertise and mastery of the group in relation to the canon text, presenting this text as a ‘lock’ which is to be broken. He presents speculation as rational detection, and argues that; “The group’s aesthetic criteria mirror those Sherry Turkle sees as characteristic of Hacker culture” (Jenkins, 1995, 55). More recently Jenkins has presented fandom as skilled, inclusive, information-based and motivated by:

‘epistemophilia’ not simply a pleasure in knowing, but a pleasure in exchanging knowledge (Jenkins, 2002, 160).

In “Interactive Audiences?” (2002) - a paper which reflects a growing interest in new media environments - we again find a shift in theory and concept-borrowing. Here Jenkins uses Levy’s concept of “the cosmopedia.” This is described as:

the new ‘knowledge space’ [...] which might emerge as citizens more fully realise the potentials of the new media environment. (Jenkins, 2002, 158)

He uses this to present fan collectives as “knowledge communities,”¹¹ stating that:

Online fan communities are the most fully realised versions of Levy’s cosmopedia. They are expansive self-organising groups focused around the collective production, debate and circulation of meanings, interpretations and fantasies in response to various artefacts of contemporary popular culture. (Jenkins, 2002,158).

Jenkins’ transitional move from fans as poachers, to hackers, to Levy’s “cosmopedia” and “knowledge communities,” suggests a developmental model of advancement – an increasing emphasis on intellectual activity and the potential of collective agency driven by the technologisation of fan practices. Whilst this work has been very important in terms of highlighting fan practices as worthy of academic study, and exploring the nature of this activity, little detailed exploration of the production of this knowledge and expertise is provided. The organisation and formation of regulatory practices within fan cultures appears to demand further exploration. Such moves have been seen in recent work on the formation of hierarchies and establishing of expertise within fan cultures which I discuss in the next section; my own work extends and develops the exploration of these issues.

¹¹ “voluntary, temporary and tactical affiliations, defined through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments.. held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge.” (Jenkins, 2002, 158)

Matt Hills has introduced a note of caution in respect of the idea of fans as what he terms “fan-scholars” (Hills, 2002). This concern is voiced in relation to what he terms “media theorising” within fan cultures; this includes the use of “academic practices of evidence (referencing), rigour and systematicity in [fans] explorations of a narrative universe” (2004, 141). Hills voices hesitancy about the ways that academics have generalised from local examples of media theorising, noting that such practices may be limited to particular fan objects and interests:

Although media theory may be beginning to become visible to professional academics in its more out-of-place, tactical guises, such shifts appear to be generally restricted to media fandoms whose demographics and taste cultures are not so far away from those of academia (perhaps a reason why *Buffy*'s academic audience contain so much academic/fan hybridity). While *Buffy*, *Doctor Who* and *Strange Days* may, as examples of cult television and film, sustain factions of fan-scholars, it is more difficult to ascertain tactical fan scholarship around, for example, the US ABC daytime soap *One Life to Live*. (144)

In support of this, Hills cites S. Elizabeth Bird's *The Audience in Everyday Life* (2003) where she suggests that fans of *One Life to Live* posting online:

are much more self-conscious about over-intellectualising and often flag such comments with somewhat defensive comments. (Bird cited in Hills, 2004, 144).

Like Sandvoss's warnings against a blinkered focus on specific types of producerly fan cultures, Hills suggests that academics' own particular interests have restricted the readings of fans presented in fan research.

In this section I have explored two ways in which the productivity of fans has been approached within fan studies literature; the presentation of fans as resistant performers and as skilled agents. In each case the demonstration of the activity and productivity of fans has been used to demonstrate that consumers are “not the mere vessels of mainstream popular culture” (MacDonald, 1998, 136). In each the fan is configured in opposition/resemblance to an external referent; in the first, the fan's opposition to patriarchal and/or corporate interest; in the second, the fan's relationship to those within the ‘academy.’

In each case, it is the academic who identifies the value inherent within the practice. The framework from which the value is identified is external to the practice. The revelation of competence within fan activity resonates with the myth of emancipation introduced in the previous section, involving the identification of skills which might not

be recognised by the fans (but which can be recognised by the academic author). By suggesting that there is a similarity between the practices of fans and academics, this work challenges the fortressing of academic skills/practices as ‘other’ to the subordinated/everyday. This resonates with broader democratising moves within media education. However, as in Dowling’s discussion of the myth of emancipation in relation to ethnomathematics, here too this challenge is provided by the academic, who speaks from a position of relative superiority and legitimacy. The relationship (and tension) between fan and academic positions¹² has implications for emerging disciplines like fan and game studies. In the next chapter I will consider how the recognition of skilled and knowledgeable practices of fans has corresponded with a methodological validation of fan perspectives in approaches to research. There we will see fan studies researchers strategically positioning themselves as “scholar-fans” (Hills, 2002) in order to validate their interpretation of fan cultures.

My use of the distinction between performance and competence in exploring this literature has been intended to highlight the differing emphases within these claims, which are themselves strategic moves in the construction of specific readings of the nature and value of fan practices. Tensions are evident within this work; the development and policing of genres of fanfiction demonstrating a competence-based perspective which is institutionalised in fan communities (and perhaps beyond). By reading fans as resistant to the text, work has also emphasised their ability to escape the potential ‘grip’ of the text. This suggests a more general competence, which will be explored in a somewhat different vein in relation to a distinction between *intellectual* and *sentimental* engagement in Chapter 5, and in relation to data from COA and SHH in Chapter 9. The focus on individual production has been read as challenging the distinction between consumers and producers; a move which appears to take specific materiality in gaming productivity, but has been long-recognised in respect of more traditional fan activities (such as the move of fans into professional publishing, see Bacon-Smith, 2000). As scholars such as Hills (2004), Sandvoss (2005) and Williamson (2005) suggest, certain types of productivity have been granted particular attention in this literature. This has been to the potential detriment of other modes of fan involvement, excluding the casual or temporary fan interest, but also more negative

¹² Which has become a key concern in Hills’ work (2002, 2004).

practices. Such involvement has begun to be examined and extended in interesting ways however, for example in Jonathan Gray's work on antifandom (2003, 2005). This work will be discussed in Chapter 7, where I explore the stretching of fan affiliation on COA and SHH.

2.4 NORMS, HIERARCHY AND DEVIANCE – THE REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL PRACTICE IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES AND FAN CULTURES

In this section I turn from examining the responses of academics to the practices of fans, to the ways in which the formation of social relationships within fan cultures and online communities have been examined. Whilst Chapter 5 contains a discussion of community at a conceptual level, I here draw from the literature in order to contextualise my discussion of what I will be referring to as *stabilising* and *destabilising* strategies within COA and SHH.

At certain points, both fan cultures and online communities have been presented as demonstrating and/or promising ideals of democracy and equality. John Perry Barlow's *A Declaration of the Independence for Cyberspace* (1996), for example, suggested the possibility of liberal environments liberated from the real world constraints relating to "property, expression, identity, movement, and context" (no page nos.). The increasing documentation of destabilising acts, processes of exclusion, and examples of aggression within such contexts has served to challenge such hopes. In this section I focus on three areas in order to explore these issues. Firstly, I look to the literature which has explored the ways that online communities establish and maintain 'normal,' acceptable practices. I then examine the literature relating to the formation of hierarchy in online communities and fan cultures. I conclude with a consideration of the more 'disruptive' aspects of online life. The movement I am suggesting by structuring my discussion in this way - from an early focus on stable online/fan sites and practices to the increasing attention on the competitive and disruptive nature of life in fan and online communities - clearly involves some simplification of the huge amount of literature in these fields. This movement can, however, be identified as a general trend in this work.

THE MAINTENANCE OF GOOD COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Utopian images of the resurgence and re-invigoration of community via the Internet were founded on the idea that harmonious interaction could be maintained within online environments. Such ideas were proposed in early work by authors including Howard Rheingold (1993) who introduced online communities such as The WELL.* A number of researchers have since explored the ways in which such harmony might be maintained, examining the local production of net etiquette; moves which attempt to define 'good' practice within online settings (see Sternberg, 2000; Conrad, 2002; Preece, 2004). These organisational moves can be seen in the writing and posting of Rules of Use and FAQs which outline good (and bad) practice. These construct ideals of what Goffman (1963) calls "social order." Goffman describes this as:

the consequence of any set of moral norms that regulates the way in which persons pursue objectives. The set of norms does not specify the objectives the participants are to seek, nor the pattern formed by and through the coordination or integration of these ends, but merely the modes of seeking them. Traffic rules and the consequent traffic order provide an obvious example. (Goffman, 1963, 8)

The production of such mechanisms involves the establishing and negotiation of stabilising moves which ties into the ways in which online groups "take social form" and thus, Baym suggests, can be seen to become 'communities' (see Baym, 2002, 70). Whilst Baym has suggested that

it is questionable whether any behavioural standards apply to all computer-mediated groups. (Baym, 2002, 70)

some expectations have become more widespread than others. One rule which has not been restricted to online communities is the use of spoiler* warnings when revealing potentially significant information - for example relating to the storyline of television series - via flagging in topics/titles/headers or leaving space before the potentially disruptive information so that the reader is less likely to stumble across it by accident.

Other norms are more specific to particular settings. In her study of the *All My Children* usenet group r.a.t.s introduced in Section 2.3, Baym describes a range of community-specific practices. These included the differentiation of posts concerned with issues of personal interest/chat from on-topic posts (Baym, 2000), and the use of community-

binding codes such as ‘Not’ for the character ‘Nat’ (this is a pun relating to the fact that the actress playing Nat had been replaced). Baym suggests that:

These codes can serve the role that artefacts might serve face-to-face, providing central objects around which the group can define itself. Group meanings are codified// in other ways as well; the very forms of the spoiler, the update, the sighting, and the other genres are artefact-like instantiations of group organization. (116)

The delineation of normal, acceptable practices does not just serve to construct a characteristic ‘atmosphere,’ but also involves the exclusion of undesirable practices and establishing of competence in terms of legitimate “ways of speaking” (Baym, 2002, 70). Beyond the establishing of institutionalised rules and regulation, however, good behaviour has to be maintained through the continual negotiation of these rules of engagement (see Baym, 2000, 141). Those sites that have demonstrated an ability to maintain good behaviour in this way (SeniorNet as described by Ito et al, 2000; The WELL as described by Rheingold), have been presented as the success stories of online life.

In a similar way to early studies of online community, early work on media fans tended to emphasise the stability of fan communities. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins suggests that although disagreements serve an important role in maintaining the lifeblood of the fan community, conflict is relatively unusual. Instead consensus is maintained thanks to the “institutional structure” of fandom (Jenkins, 2002):

Sometimes, there are heated disagreements about the relative merits of a given text or character, yet, this situation is relatively rare; a high degree of consensus shapes fan reception and a fairly consistent set of criteria are applied by fans to each new episode. (Jenkins, 1992, 95)

“Consensus” here relates specifically to the interpretation of the canon text by fans (see Chapter 7); however the notion of relatively stable fan cultures extends throughout Jenkins’ work.

Studies of Internet-based fan communities have provided examples of similarly supportive and stable cultures in online environments. Rebecca Black, for example, has described how the maintenance of good relations within an online manga-related fanfiction site underpins the provision of peer support:

the marked emphasis on constructive criticism and lack of tolerance for flaming helps to create a safe, accessible space for ELLs [English language learners] and others to write in. These elements of the site also help ELL authors to establish a legitimate social position within the community as accomplished writers and promote their continued affiliation with writing in English. (Black, 2005, 126)

In her study of r.a.t.s, Baym paid specific attention to the successful handling of disagreements in her research setting, describing the skill of the group at “accomplishing friendliness” (Baym, 2000, 120). She suggests that within this context:

Whether consciously or not, participants orient to an ethic of friendliness when they write their messages, regardless of the particular practice in which they are engaged. In short, friendliness is something a group *does* rather than something a group *is*. (Baym, 2000, 121, her emphasis)

Baym describes the variety of ways in which this ethic is maintained “both in terms of the strategies by which the group tone down the confrontational nature of posts” (124), and how “social alignments between the participants” (125) are established. The success of this ethic of friendliness is presented as only really being challenged by the influx of a large number of new members, a destabilising event to which I will return in Chapter 5.

Although the gendering of practice within fan cultures is not a central focus of my work, it is interesting to note that such stabilising work is often presented as being gendered, as ‘feminine’ effort to sustain good natured environment (see Herring, 1994). Such claims provide an interesting perspective on my own analysis of activity within COA and SHH.

UNEQUAL SETTINGS – THE FORMATION OF HIERARCHY

In contrast to the focus on the maintenance of stability and ‘friendliness’ in the work introduced above, academics have recently paid increasing attention to the wranglings for status within such settings. In the process, it has become clear that online environments and fan cultures are by no means the egalitarian, liberal spaces that their early proponents may have hoped, but are often strictly hierarchised and competitive spaces.

Bertha Chin has suggested that by presenting fan cultures as enthusiastic and specialist social structures separate from ‘normal life,’ fan scholars such as Jenkins tended to overemphasise the harmony between collective and individual agency, and, in doing so, maintained “the separation of fan practices, and in essence, fan communities from the hierarchical structures that influence everyday life” (Chin, 2002, no page nos.). To some

extent, this was a political move in order to speak positively for fans, as Jenkins has since acknowledged (see Hills and Jenkins, 2001).

Some marked differentiation between the roles, responsibilities, and status of fans was, however, evident in the early work on fans. Bacon-Smith's (1992) discussion of the organisation of support-groups within offline fan cultures, for example, introduced a number of the key figures within *Star Trek* fandom as figureheads/leaders in the settings. The formation of hierarchy within fan cultures remained relatively unexplored, however. Work on fan communities in the past decade - particularly that focusing on online environments - has increasingly been concerned with "highlighting the replication of hierarchies within subcultures" (Sandvoss, 2005, 39). The issue of social stratification both within and between fan communities has become a key concern.

In a study of *Quantum Leap* related newsgroups and email lists, Andrea Macdonald argues:

In my studies of CMC, I have found a milieu that does contain the probability of anonymity and thus an uninhibited form of communication but more often than not replicates many of the hierarchical formations that exist in non computer-mediated communication. (Macdonald, 1998, 133)

Macdonald's paper was one of the first studies to explore the stratification of fan cultures. Macdonald identified different types - or, in her terms "multiple dimensions" - of hierarchy at play in such settings, against which the position of individual fans was established. These included hierarchy of "fandom level or quality" (137),¹³ access (137),¹⁴ and - with the development of the Internet - "technological competence and access" (139). She described how "executive fans" held particular status because of their strong position in relation to these dimensions, with the "centrality" of one executive fan - Alex - resting on her ability to maintain "multiple positions" (138).

Macdonald's work has since been developed and extended by other researchers interested in "how fan 'status' is built up" (Hills, 2002, 46), and who understand fan cultures;

¹³ "separates fans by amount of fan participation - those who attend conventions and other organized events versus those who do not" (137))

¹⁴ "direct access to actors, producers of the show, production personnel, and in some rare cases actual shooting of episodes" (137)

not simply as a community but *also as a social hierarchy* where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status. (Hills, 2002, 46, his emphasis).

A number of specific strategies by which status is claimed and established within fan cultures have been identified within this literature. Matthew Smith, for example, has described the strategies by which comic book zine* producers establish their position within e-zine* communities, suggesting that they engage in two “supra-strategies”:

The first deals with the notion of presenting one’s familiarity within the topic, and thus one’s qualifications to publish an e-zine about that topic” [...] The second supra-strategy deals with ways in which e-zine editors invite the active participation of their readers. They encourage would-be contributors with invitations such as “Want to write for *Alphascope*? Got an article you’d like to contribute? Why not write us?” (Smith, 1999, 89)

Smith describes how the regularity of “well-written, well-informed feature articles boosts the credibility of the e-zine” (93) and works to maintain the author’s position of authority within these communities.

Rebecca Williams has recruited Macdonald’s term “executive fans” in her examination of spoiler sites in *BtVS* fandom. She describes the strategies of control displayed by owners of *BtVS* fan sites as placing restrictions both on the form and content of posting activity:

As well as rules on flaming* and netiquette, one prolific *BtVS* spoiler board, The Buffy Cross and Stake has a stringent list of banned topics, including discussion of character sexuality, the issue of Spike’s redemption and the Buffy/Spike relationship” (Williams, 2004, no page nos).

Elsewhere, the status of executive fans has been presented not just in terms of their ‘power’ to make such decisions but also in terms of authorship (the star fanfic writers/fanart artists), and ownership. Will Brooker describes how the guestbook on a Luke Skywalker fansite “is crammed with girls’ names [...] all of whom salute Kristen [the owner/author], telling her that her site rocks and Luke rules.” (Brooker, 2002, 201), and Cassandra Amesley describes the attendance at *Star Trek* conventions of “superfans” such as “Jerry, who publishes a zine about other fanzines” (Amesley, 1989, 323). This interest has been continued by Hills’ (2006) work on “subcultural celebrities” in a recent book on celebrity culture, where he challenges the distinction between fans and celebrities.

Alongside the identification of key fans with particular levels of status and strategies for obtaining elevated positions within fan cultures, fan researchers have examined internal

struggles for legitimacy and authority within such sites. As Rebecca Williams notes, whilst fans have themselves been marginalised:

Fans can also marginalise and 'other' within a particular fan culture. Therefore fandoms can no longer be seen as utopian, as was the trend with early academic work, such as Camille Bacon-Smith's assertion that 'the media fan community has no established hierarchy' (1992, 41) (Williams, 2004, no page nos.)

Bertha Chin has explored the connections and conflicts between opposing groups of shippers* within *BtVS* and *Angel* fandoms. She describes the varying status and authority that comes with affiliating oneself to one romantic pairing over another (Buffy/Angel rather than Cordelia/Angel, for example), and how this serves to position specialised interest groups within the larger fan culture:

the fans recognise that being the parent show and the larger and more outspoken group, the *Buffy* fans have a voice of greater authority than fans of Cordelia, for instance who also support the pairing of Cordy and Angel on *Angel*. (Chin, 2002, no page nos.).

Chin's data - which includes examples of fans' experiences of being alienated and ejected from web sites - demonstrates the subdivisions and internal wranglings for legitimacy within fan communities.

The study of the formation of hierarchy within fan cultures has not only focused on internal positioning within fan cultures, but has also explored the marking out of fans' status in relation to non-fan interests. Hills, for example, describes how "tactical appropriations of media theory" (2004, 139) - which, he suggests, attribute authority to members of fan communities - also serve to "monitor, and maintain, [fans'] valued cultural distinction(s) from non-fans" (Hills, 2004, 141). The marking out of cultural difference in this way will be discussed further in Chapter 5 in relation to a conceptual discussion of 'identity,' and will be examined in relation to the posting activity on COA and SHH in Chapter 9.

CONFLICT AND ASSAULTS: DESTABLISING EVENTS AND ACTIVITY

Both online and off, the setting down of rules is no guarantee of good behaviour. The documentation of online assaults and deception has challenged the utopian ideals that infused some of the early studies of online life. The literature on online communities contains numerous descriptions of assault, deception and conflict - negative corollaries of the positive practice in 'successful' online communities - and introduces a range of terms relating to forms of 'deviance' online. As in offline contexts, this deviance is

defined in relation to the framework of expectations/norms, and thus differs from context to context. It can, however, also be seen to exploit the anonymous nature of communicating within many of these environments, which frees users adopt multiple avatars whilst protecting the ‘real’ author from censure.

Rheingold’s study of *The WELL* – a work which introduced the term “virtual community” (see Chapter 5) - contained enthusiastic claims about the potential of such sites to provide emotional and practical support, and to sustain friendships. It also, however, presented conflict as part of the regular day-to-day activity of the site. Rheingold describes how:

There has always been a lot of conflict in the WELL, breaking out into regular flamefests of interpersonal attacks from time to time. Factionalism. Gossip. Envy. Jealousy. Feuds. Brawls. Hard feelings that carry over from one discussion to another. (Rheingold, 1993, 53)

A number of events have been used as critical incidents in the work which has examined such conflict. One of the most famous of these, which received coverage not only in academic papers but also in the popular press, was the Landbadoo “virtual rape” (see Dibbell, 1993). Other examples include community responses to individual acts of communicative violence (Danis and Lee, nd); and unsettling events that had to be managed in order to prevent flame wars (Chin, 2002). Such incidents have offered stark examples of the inability of some groups to deal with attacks (Herring et al, 2002). More general explorations of misbehaviour have explored posting characteristics in forums and newsgroups. Joseph Kayany (1998) has examined the relationship between the topic of discussion and level and type of flaming*, and Smith et al have examined the “frequency, form, and tone of reproaches for misconduct” in usenet* newsgroups, exploring the posting characteristics of “offenders” and “reproachers” (Smith et al, 1997, no page nos.).

The use of various forms of moderation has become a standard way of enforcing and maintaining good behaviour and policing deviance. In the context of newsgroups, Kolloch and Smith (1996) discuss one approach in which moderators approve posts before they are added to the lists. They suggest that such groups are unusual: “one of the rare examples of a formal and enforceable institution in the usenet” (Kolloch and Smith, 1996, no page nos.). In contrast, on forums such as COA and SHH (as I will

discuss in Chapter 8), moderators intervene after messages have been posted, and are then able to delete posts, caution and ban members.

More extreme forms of punishment have also been documented. The public shaming of offenders in virtual environments has been described as akin to a “return to the medieval” (Reid, 1999, 118); this work suggests a very different image of online behaviour than that found in more romantic conceptualisations of cyberspace as an environment for human connection. Matthew Williams describes online punishment as sharing characteristics with the 13th/14th century French practice of ‘charivari’; involving the “public ridicule and physical taunting of an individual who has transcended community rules” (2000, 101). Examples include the practice of ‘toading’ offenders in MUDs*: this involves “altering the appearance and/or description of the offender’s persona into something shameful” (Williams, 2000, 101 – see also Mackinnon, 1996). These ‘criminal’ acts, and resulting forms of punishment, are presented as an extension and transformation into textual form of regulatory practices from the physical world.

The academic interest in forms of hostile and problematic behaviour has focused on a number of forms of deviant action, with particular attention granted to trolling* and flaming.* Trolling is the subject of a paper by Susan Herring et al (2002), where the practice is defined in the following terms;

1. Messages from a sender who appears outwardly sincere.
2. Messages designed to attract predictable responses or flames.
3. Messages that waste a group’s time by provoking futile argument.

In this paper, the authors explore the responses of a feminist discussion forum to the activity of a troller. Members’ attempts to contain the troller are presented as ineffective, and Herring et al suggest a number of “proactive interventions” which would improve their defence of the site. These include technical features, such as the use of message filters and the idea that users should be warned “about the patterns that trollers follow” (381) via what would essentially be a programme of education. They argue that their case study; “points to the need for online forums to articulate policies, guidelines for appropriate participation, and penalties for violating these guidelines, in advance of harassment episodes taking place” (381).

Flaming - abusive language and aggressive action - has also been much discussed (e.g. Franco et al 1995; Kayany, 1998; Vrooman, 2000). A number of 'Flame wars' have made it into the popular press. One extreme example was the "stealth attack" of the usenet* newsgroup rec.pets.cats by members of alt.tasteless in 1994 (see Quittner, 1994; also Jordan, 1999). The *Wired* journalist Joshua Quittner described how:

Hordes of new "cat lovers" suddenly besieged rec.pets.cats, offering extremely tasteless advice. One correspondent suggested nailing the hapless cats to a breadboard. Another thought firing "multiple .357 copper-jacketed hollowpoints" longitudinally through Sooti and Choad would solve the problem. (The cats' names are slang words indigenous to alt.tasteless. Choad is a word for penis, of course, and Sooti ...) [...] Whenever life began to return to normal at rec.pets.cats, someone from alt.tasteless would post an article there looking for, say, a good recipe for Polynesian cat. (Quittner, 1994, no page nos.).

Quittner presents this continuous assault as a devastating event, ultimately leading to the death of rec.pets.arts, which was unable to continue in the face of such constant aggression.

Melanie Nash has provided one example of flaming within an online fan community, presenting a case study in which *Beavis & Butthead* fans' on the alt.tv.beavis-n-butthead newsgroup responded to "gay readings" of the series. She describes how a number of group members aggressively worked to close down interpretations of the text that suggested that Beavis and Butthead were more than platonic friends. She argues that this continues a pattern seen in other *Beavis & Butthead* texts, and that:

many of B&B's [*Beavis & Butthead*'s] intertextual products and practices actually work to contain, delimit, or close down textual indeterminacy in extremely conservative ways, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality (Nash, 1999, 6)

The posts she introduces offer an extreme case of fan disagreements as flaming, with one message including the following threat:

DON'T START THE GAY THREAD OR I WILL KILL YOU!!! DO YOU HEAR ME!!! DON'T START THE GAY THREAD OR I WILL PHYSICALLY KILL YOU!!! (17).

The confrontational social nature of this negotiation and resulting restrictions upon legitimate readings, contrasts starkly with descriptions of the playful expansion and subversion of canon texts in earlier fan studies research. This raises interesting questions about what it means to 'be' a fan, provoking consideration of the regulation of responses to media texts in fan communities; this issue will be explored in relation to COA and SHH in Chapter 7.

2.5 CONCLUSION

As I suggested in the first part of this chapter, my research can be situated within a broad and well-established educational interest in popular texts and practices. This interest has stretched out in different ways in response to the expansion of the scale and scope of digital technologies, wrapping itself around a number of key concerns. Within the resulting literature, technology has been presented as leading to the production of new sites of activity, demanding new skills, and enabling new forms of creativity. The empirical focus of this work has increasingly been on the sorts of informal settings that I explore in this thesis. Each of the moves that I have identified in this work – towards democratising education, towards a focus on media production, and interest in online environments - resonates with the literature on fans which I have described in this chapter.

In discussing fan studies research, I have used an analytical distinction between competence and performance. This is not a clear cut, empirical distinction, but serves to focus attention on the strategies by which the authors of this research have interpreted, described, and attributed value to fan practices. Consideration of these strategies is important because of the celebratory nature of much of this work. In fan studies, as in the context of work on children's media culture more broadly, there is the danger of introducing one stereotype to take the place of another. As Buckingham has noted in relation to the representation of children, it is important to ensure that researchers do not end up "merely replacing the romantic image of the innocent, vulnerable child with an equally sentimental conception of the sophisticated media-wise child" (Buckingham, 1998, 38). This same warning can be addressed to work on media fans which has demonstrated similar romanticising.

The distinction between competence and performance is also helpful in consideration of the literature on online communities. The work introduced in this chapter has explored the ways in which group norms are established, activity policed, and practices challenged by deviant behaviour within such settings. In the terms I have introduced here, good behaviour can be regarded as involving the demonstration of a competence and misbehaviour may involve an individualised performance. Clearly, however,

‘deviant,’ like ‘normal’ behaviour, is context-dependent, and this distinction can be destabilised. As Goffman suggests:

An act can, of course, be proper or improper only according to the judgement of a specific social group, and even within the confines of the smallest and warmest of groups there is likely to be some dissensus and doubt. (Goffman, 1963, 5)

Hacker and trolling codes of practice and ethics (see Levy, 1984) demonstrate that adherence to ‘good’ practice can also be seen within communities devoted to disruptive behaviour. As Kolloch and Smith note; “a hostile, provocative post is an etiquette breach in most newsgroups, but not in alt.flaming, where violating decorum would mean engaging in a sober, restrained discussion” (Kolloch and Smith, 1996, no page nos.).

The literature I have discussed here has demonstrated that fan cultures are not immune from the competitive and confrontational nature of some online life. My work extends and develops this interest in different ways. The consideration of stabilising and destabilising moves - introduced in relation to the move from maintenance of norms to deviant behaviour - will be extended in my analysis of how members of COA and SHH deal with disruptive members or off-message postings (Chapters 7 and 8), and the ways that community relationships are established and maintained in times of crisis (Chapter 6). Whilst my focus has here been on the actions of participants within such settings, in my discussion of ethics in Chapter 4 I will also discuss how the actions of researchers have destabilised online activity in equally destructive ways.

The question of status and hierarchy central to much recent fan studies research will also be explored in this work, in a consideration of the micro-level wranglings for status and authority on the forums of COA and SHH, and the ways in which authority is claimed within these sites (Chapter 8). This will involve an attempt to demonstrate the variety of strategies for claiming authority on these sites, and how these become intertwined with de/stabilising moves. Now however, I move to outlining my research project, starting with general methodological issues pertaining to the study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS I

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In his introduction to *Online Social Research: Methods, Issues & Ethics* (Johns et al, 2004), Norman Denzin describes Internet researchers as skilled bricoleurs engaged in the production of hybrid research projects established in relation to different methodological and theoretical traditions and research settings. This description continued a characterisation of qualitative researchers as bricoleurs which Denzin began (with Yvonna S. Lincoln) in *The Handbook of Qualitative Research (1994)*¹⁵ – a collection of papers addressing the complexities and challenges of qualitative research. In *Online Social Research*, however, the issues faced by the researcher-as-bricoleur have been extended to incorporate the particular challenges of research within ‘virtual’ domains. Denzin cites Mann & Stewart’s earlier consideration of the relationship between established research methods and the methodological challenges of online environments (Mann and Stewart, 2000), in describing how “online researchers are continually inventing or piecing together new research tools, fitting old methods to new problems” (Denzin, 2004, 2).

The methodological approach outlined in this chapter demonstrates some of the hybridity that Denzin suggests by drawing from conventional approaches to qualitative research, as well as emerging practices in relation to online research. Whilst Internet research remains a relatively young field, there is already a rich body of work providing guidance for the novice Internet researcher. Despite Denzin’s romanticised characterisation of the sophisticated and adept Internet researcher, many researchers within this field have presented the missteps and learnings that occurred during their studies. These often provide some of the most useful features of this work, as they make explicit the particular difficulties of translating traditional research approaches to online environments. For this reason, whilst outlining my research project, I aim to incorporate a discussion of the development of my research approach. This development can be seen both in terms of my response to unexpected contingent events, and also my increasing understanding of the nature of the environments and the tools and techniques available to explore them. This is particularly relevant, for example, in

¹⁵ See Crotty (2003) on their use of this concept, which they have taken from Levi-Strauss, but this is a recontextualisation that, Crotty argues, misrepresents Levi-Strauss’s use of the concept.

relation to the changing nature of the research settings during the timeframe of the study which raised a range of methodological, practical, and ethical issues.

The presentation of my research in this chapter moves from a consideration of general research design issues, to discussion of sampling and data collection issues, closing with a description of the analytical approach taken. This structure follows the framework outlined by Andrew Brown and Paul Dowling in *Doing Research, Reading Research* (1998). Brown and Dowling present the process of research as involving the generation of a ‘language of description’¹⁶ from a series of localising and specialising moves in relation to empirical and theoretical domains – a theorisation of research activity which they term *constructive description*. This approach, which “understands research as a particular coherent and systematic and reflexive mode of interrogation” (Brown and Dowling, 1998, 4), is helpful as it makes explicit a particular way of engaging with - and moving between - antecedent work and empirical material throughout the research process. In doing so, it clarifies moves which can appear to merge into an amorphous endeavour. A discussion of ethical issues pertaining to Internet research and my own study - issues only briefly discussed by Brown and Dowling - follows in Chapter 4.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN ISSUES

POSITIONING MY RESEARCH IN RELATION TO ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TO THE INTERNET

Ethnographic approaches to research have played a significant role in defining how academics have come to perceive the Internet and its cultures. Christine Hine (2005a), for example, has described how the development of naturalistic approaches to the Internet challenged the conceptualisation of computer-mediated-communication (cmc) as an impoverished medium, an understanding based on earlier experimental studies of online communication within psychology. She suggests that:

a methodological shift, the claiming of the online context as an ethnographic field site, was crucial in establishing the status of Internet communications as culture. While psychological experiments

¹⁶ The idea of a language of description originates in the work of Basil Bernstein, who describes it as “a translation device whereby one language is transformed into another” (Bernstein, 1996, 135). Although Dowling uses this term in his earlier work (see Dowling, 1998), more recently he has adopted the alternative term “organisational language” to describe his work (see Dowling 2005b). Dowling’s organisational language - *Social Activity Theory* – will be discussed in Chapter 5. In describing the development of theoretical language in my own work, I have used the term language of description, as described in relation to the process of research in Brown and Dowling (1998).

demonstrated its paucity, ethnographic methods were able to demonstrate its cultural richness. It is possible to go further and to suggest that our knowledge of the Internet as a cultural context is intrinsically tied up with the application of ethnography. The method and the phenomenon define one another in a relationship of mutual dependence. (Hine, 2005a, 8)

In a similar way, ethnographic approaches to the study of both audiences and fan cultures in the 1980s and 1990s were to reinforce theoretical developments such as Fiske's active audience model, helping to challenge the characterisation of audiences developed within media effects research. Approaches to fan cultures such as Bacon-Smith's "intergalactic" ethnography (1992), in which the researcher entered and became a participant within a fan community, served to 'thicken' existing understandings of such groups. The studies of Internet fandom and online community introduced in the previous chapter have continued a broader "drift towards 'the ethnographic'" (Ang, 1996, 71); the production of grounded, exploratory studies of meaning-making within localised interest groups, via fieldwork including participant observation and interviews in both real and online environments (see for example, Watson, 1997; Baym, 2000; Wakefield, 2001; Gatson and Zweerink, 2004a; Bury, 2005).

There are a number of key differences between the design of my study and ethnographic approaches to research. As I will outline later in this chapter, these include the ways in which I am conceptualising and have collected the data from COA and SHH, and in particular, my approach to analysis. My project does, however, bear a number of similarities with ethnographic research techniques - most evident in respect of my longitudinal observation of COA and SHH. This has meant that discussion of ethnographic techniques in the literature relating to online research methods has proved to be a vital source of information and guidance.¹⁷ One key debate within this work, which helped me define my handling and delineating of COA and SHH as research settings, has considered the nature (and status) of fieldwork carried out in online environments.

The problem of "the breaching of the field" (Dicks and Mason, 1998) is not solely the concern of Internet researchers, but is at the heart of broader moves from the investigation of "regionally circumscribed epistemic communities" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997, 8) to "hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences" (Clifford, 1997a, 24). It is

¹⁷ See Mason and Dicks, 1999; Kendall, 1999, 2004; Hine, 2000; Miller and Slater, 2000; Wittel, 2000; Mason, 2001; Leander and Johnson, 2002; Rutter and Smith, 2005.

visible, for example, in the response of academics to the “complex connectivity” of globalisation (Tomlinson, 1999) and in work on travel and diaspora studies (Clifford, 1997a, 1997b). However the Internet offers its own particular challenges for researchers, as connections are materially visible in hypertext links and, in practical terms, any page can potentially take the user to any other page.

A variety of theoretical and analytical approaches to Internet connectivity have been presented by Internet scholars; work on networks (Wellman, 1999, 2001); scapes (Gille and Ó Riain, 2002); and web spheres (Schneider and Foot, 2004, 2005). The discussion of ethnography in relation to online environments has involved varying reconfigurations of traditional anthropological procedures including “virtual ethnography” (Hine, 2000), “interface anthropology” (Escobar, 2000), “network ethnography” (Howard, 2002) and “connective ethnography” (Leander and Johnson, 2002). Central to much of this work is a focus on the associations and relationships between different sites of practice, involving a shift in attention “from place to interaction, from location to movement” (Markham, 2004, 114). This movement may involve both on and offline sites. Marcus and Fischer’s conceptualisation of multi-sited ethnography (1986, also Marcus, 1995, 1998) - which involves a shift in research practice described by Hill and Ó Riain as a move from “being there” to “chasing things around” (2002, 283) – has here been influential (see Wittel, 2000).

This move from ‘traditional’ to ‘virtual’ ethnography and increasing focus on the associations made by the researcher, can be considered in terms of a shift from the ethnographer as ‘cartographer’ – mapping the relations and practices within a given site of culture – to the ethnographer as “flaneur” (Benjamin, 1983); marking out their journey as they wander within and between sites of practice. On one level, this distinction is primarily down to the way in which the research is presented. The mapping of a space or culture is clearly constructed via a multiplicity of journeys, but these journeys are concealed within the final product; the map. In contrast, these journeys are brought to the foreground in many of the approaches to ethnography online, where “what ties fieldwork locations is the ethnographer’s discovery of traces and clues, her logic of association” (Markham, 2004, 114).

My own fieldwork within COA and SHH bears similarities with more traditional ‘mapping’ approaches to the study of cultures. In some ways, my approach to the forums on these sites is similar to the work on “threaded conversational environments” (Smith, 2004) such as newsgroups and MUDs* which dominated the early stages of Internet research (see Feldman, 1997). These studies suggested that it is possible for the ethnographer to ‘dwell’ quite easily within online settings, thus undertaking a relatively conventional form of ethnographic research; albeit one based upon the electronic utterances of invisible subjects. To some extent my research continues such approaches. However, the particular trajectory of my involvement with, and experience of, the forum activity on these sites has been driven by a sampling strategy fuelled by both theoretical and empirical interests. Whilst I have attempted to ensure the reliability of my findings by extending my gaze to different parts of COA and SHH (as I will discuss later), my research can be considered as representing one particular journey, rather than a totalising reading of these settings.

CONTRASTING CASES

This research can be positioned in relation to a tradition within case study research that takes qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis. The danger of recruiting such terms, however, as Brown and Dowling have suggested, is that they become fetishised (1998, 165). I here share both the hesitancy in the use of the term “case study,” and belief in the more general need to consider “the broad implications of what it means to describe and analyse specific instances, or ‘cases’” noted by Lapping (2004, 45). The rationale for my selection of COA and SHH as cases will be presented in the next section; here I want to first locate my use of contrasting cases in relation to recent studies that have set up comparisons between sites of fan activity.

A number of fan scholars have developed their work on fandom by exploring similarities and differences across fan sites in separate studies, generalising from the collection of cases; such development is seen in the work of Jenkins and Hills, for example. Recent examples of more explicitly comparative designs include Rebecca Williams’ ongoing doctoral research into US and UK television fandom. This explores the similarities and differences between fan activity relating to three television genres:

drama, soap and reality television.¹⁸ Brooker's (2005) consideration of the relationship between the Lewis Carroll Society of Great Britain and soap opera fandom as representatives of "high cultural" and "popular" fandom is another. The most significant recent example is probably Steven Bailey's (2005) work on the formation of fan identity in relation to three empirical contexts: "a local avant-garde film scene"; the "discursive world of the internationally popular rock band Kiss"; and the online audience community devoted to the animated TV series *Futurama* (Bailey, 2005, 9). Bailey suggests that these sites represent similarities but also key differences "manifested along three distinct axes [...]"; media, space, and what he refers to as "the more elusive field of cultural connotation" (9).¹⁹ In terms of media, for example, Bailey is referring both to the differences between the objects of attention in each case (film/music/television) and the range of communicative media by which each interest is realised.²⁰ He presents the choice of these settings as theoretically driven, using the sites to explore an existing understanding of identity formation and the relationship of this to the objects and sites of fan practice (I will return to his work in Chapter 9). In doing so, he borrows Burawoy's conceptualisation of the "extended case method," an approach in which "empirical research serves a dialogical role, informing and reshaping theoretical work" rather than being "designed [...] as individual, free-standing analyses, even though each site may hold a certain contingent unity" (Bailey, 2005, 8).

Although I am approaching COA and SHH from a particular interpretive framework (which will be outlined in Chapter 5), and my work is similarly dialogic in terms of moves between theory and data, my approach to these settings has been more exploratory than Bailey's theory-driven work. My approach is not strictly comparative, instead seeking to explore the continuities and discontinuities between the two sites, sites which have been chosen (as will be discussed in the next section) on the basis of specific claims within the literature relating to popular culture texts and audiences. In the initial proposals for my research I had intended to examine only one setting. During the initial stage of my research, I felt that the introduction of contrasting cases would provide a richer exploration of fan activity than would have been possible had I focused on a single case. It is to the specifics of my approach to sampling that I now turn,

¹⁸ Personal correspondence by email, 15 August 2006.

¹⁹ Which positions these three sites in relation to the mainstream (Bailey, 2005, 9).

²⁰ This is both in terms of medium – such as print and website activity, and also 'scale' – whether local or international (see Bailey, 2005, 8).

beginning with my decision to focus on fans of *Angel* and *Silent Hill*. This will begin with a description of these texts which is intended to provide some context to the data presented in Chapters 6-9.

3.3 SAMPLING ISSUES

THE SELECTION OF FAN OBJECTS: ANGEL AND SILENT HILL

A spin-off of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)*, *Angel* ran on the WB network in the US for 5 seasons and 110 episodes, premiering on 5th October 1999 and bowing out on 19th May 2004. In the UK, *Angel* screened on Sky, and on terrestrial television on Channel 4 (series 1-2) and Channel 5 (series 3-5).

Created by Joss Whedon (who had also created *BtVS*) and David Greenwalt, *Angel* merged fantasy/horror and detective genres, focusing on the adventures of a vampire, the title-character Angel (played by the actor David Boreanaz). Angel had been Buffy's brooding boyfriend in the early seasons of *BtVS*. He left Sunnydale (Buffy's home) at the end of Season 3, moving to Los Angeles where he set up a detective agency and worked to "help the helpless" and atone for sins he had committed in his previous incarnation as "Angelus" "One of the most vicious vampires in history."²¹

Angel was darker and more adult than *BtVS*, driven by Angel's guilt over his previous actions, his tortured relationship with Buffy, and his quest for absolution. The series maintained its connections to *BtVS* and the continuity of the fictional reality of the 'Buffyverse'* whilst also extending it with new events and characters. This continuity was established via reference to common events and the presence of key *BtVS* characters on *Angel*. Some characters moved to *Angel* permanently. These included Cordelia Chase (who started life on *BtVS* as the prototypical 'valley girl' at Sunnydale High School and ended up a love interest for Angel); Buffy's hapless watcher Wesley Wyndham Price; and in Season 5, Spike, the blonde vampire whom Angel had 'sired' (and who was to provide a source of continued annoyance to Angel, primarily arising

²¹ "Angelus was cursed with a Soul by the Kalderash Gypsies in 1898; subsequently he immigrated to America and avoided contact with humans. By the 1950's he was calling himself "Angel" instead of Angelus. Has lost his Soul (and then regained it) twice since 1898)." <http://www.whedonwiki.com/index.php/Main/Angel>

out of his relationship with Buffy after Angel's departure from Sunnydale). Some characters, including Buffy (played by Sarah Michelle Gellar), made more fleeting appearances. Like *BtVS*, *Angel* was to inspire a range of secondary texts including an official magazine,²² a range of novels²³ and comics,²⁴ and its own devoted fan base and websites.

The *Silent Hill* series of survival horror* videogames are produced by the Japanese videogames developer Konami.* The series contains four games to date which are available on different games platforms; *Silent Hill* (1999), *Silent Hill 2* (2001), *Silent Hill 3* (2003), and *Silent Hill 4* (2004) and one Gaiden* game *Silent Hill: Play Novel* (2001) which was not released outside of Japan. *Silent Hill 5* is planned for one of the 'next generation' consoles,²⁵ but information about it currently remains scarce.

The title of the series refers to the fictional town of Silent Hill, which serves as a key location within the games (although the fourth game, as shall be discussed in Chapter 7, takes place outside of the town). Games 1-3 involve different protagonists drawn to Silent Hill where they enter - and are forced to explore - a nightmarish world of grotesque creatures and shifting topography. The games are marketed as offering an adult form of horror entertainment; this is evident in their certification (each game having received a 15 or 18 certificate), and in their introductory titles which warn players of 'scenes of violence and cruelty' (Kirkland, 2005, no page nos.). The series has established a reputation for a particularly 'sophisticated' form of horror, generated within the gameplay experience by an atmospheric use of sound and fog and driving fictional narrative. In broad terms, the series evokes the work of horror writers such as HP Lovecraft and Clive Barker in its use of alternative worlds and nightmarish creatures; "some of which seem to have been included simply to frighten and alarm rather than cause actual physical harm" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silent_Hill).

Silent Hill is also known for an exploratory form of gameplay where the gamer negotiates horrific environments whilst fielding and fighting monsters and solving

²² (published by Titan publishing <http://www.titanpublishinggroup.com/fanclubs.html>)

²³ For example the series of novels published by Pocket Books, including Nancy Holder's *Not Forgotten* (2000).

²⁴ Published by Dark Horse Comics, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angel_comics.

²⁵ http://www.eurogamer.net/article.php?article_id=56340.

puzzles. The games are played predominantly from a third person point of view (positioned behind the avatar), supplemented by cinematic cut scenes. A range of possible alternative endings are achievable, dependent upon the decisions made and skill demonstrated throughout the game. Like *Angel*, the series has inspired a range of secondary texts, web activity, novels, comics, and the *Silent Hill* film released in April 2006.

Angel and *Silent Hill* are successful entertainment titles with established audiences. Each has spawned a range of secondary and related texts as well as generating media, academic,²⁶ and fan interest. This does not make them unique. Numerous other popular texts have inspired similar attention and could feasibly have served as productive cases. Several influences and criteria led to my decision to focus on the fans of these two titles.

The selection was partly due to personal preference; my interest in, and exposure to, these texts. When I began to plan my research, my interest in *Angel* was already established. I had watched *BtVS* and *Angel* and attended a number of related events. These included two fan conventions in November 2001²⁷ and May 2002,²⁸ and the first academic conference on *BtVS/Angel* in October 2002.²⁹ I also had an existing personal interest in the *Silent Hill* series – having played both *Silent Hill 2* and *3*. There was, however, some difference between my exposure to, and understanding of, *Silent Hill* and *Angel*. For example, I was less familiar with the history of the *Silent Hill* series than I was with that of *Angel*. This had implications in regards to my initial observation of the sites. To some extent while making the “familiar strange” in my observation of COA, I was making the “strange familiar” on SHH (Hodge and Tripp, 1986).

The decision to focus on *Angel* and *Silent Hill* was also based upon more dispassionate and ‘academic’ criteria. Firstly, in selecting *Angel* and *Silent Hill*, I was interested in setting up contrasting cases which would enable me to explore the dis/continuities

²⁶ For academic approaches to the *Silent Hill* games see Carr, 2003; Kirkland, 2005; Lankoski, 2005. For academic discussion of *Angel* see the edited collection of papers *Reading Angel: The TV Spin-off with a Soul* (Abbott, 2005). *Slayage: The Online Journal of International Buffy Studies* at www.slayage.tv is also a good online source of academic papers on both *Angel* and its parent series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

²⁷ “Bad Girls” convention. 9th-11th November 2001.

²⁸ “Bad Girls and Wild Boys” convention, 3-5th May 2002.

²⁹ *Blood, Text and Fears: Reading Around Buffy the Vampire Slayer* at the University of East Anglia, Norwich

between the activities of fans of traditional and more interactive and “ergodic” (Aarseth, 1997) media texts. This interest was informed by the literature surrounding these mediums; see, for example, Frasca (2003) on the narratology versus ludology debate within Game Studies. The setting up of this contrast also introduced the issue of gender; in comparison to television audiences, the demographic of videogame players has long been perceived as male (although this has been challenged more recently by the recognition that there are increasing numbers of female gamers, and work on games targeted at a female audience³⁰). Although the gendering of the activity on COA and SHH is not key focus of my research, this appeared to introduce issues of potential interest which might open up questions for examination at a later date. The horror genre – to which both *Angel* and *Silent Hill* can be linked – has also been presented as inspiring particular modes of engagement, which I was interested in exploring in relation to these two settings (see Hills, 2002, and my own discussion of fan identity in Chapter 9). The selection of a television fan site and a videogame fan site was therefore intended to examine the ways in which fan objects which have been presented as significantly different in the literature are discussed by their fans.

Secondly, whilst both *Angel* and *Silent Hill* have received academic attention, the practices of the fans of these titles remain less examined. There has been a great deal of academic interest in *BtVS* fans (particularly within what has been termed “Buffy studies”; see, for example Williamson, 2005), but *Angel* fans have received less attention. Their status as fans of a spin-off appears to raise interesting issues; for example, how they negotiate the relationship between the two series. To date, I have not found any studies of *Silent Hill* fans.

A final, and significant, reason for the choice of these texts was that in each case I was aware that there would be key events occurring during the duration of my study. These included the rumoured cancellation of *Angel* and the anticipated release of *Silent Hill 4* (see Fig. 3.1), events which suggested different stages in the lifecycle of fan objects. Such events were important not only because they suggested that the fan interest would be sustained during the timeframe of my study, but also because I was interested in exploring such events as critical cases. Chapter 6 for example, examines the hacking of

³⁰ For discussion of these moves in the context of a research project into gender and game design see Hartman and Klimmt, 2006.

SHH and the closure of the COA forums. Chapter 9 looks at the impact of two events which I will argue involved a recontextualisation of the fan objects into more public settings: the release of the *Silent Hill* film and the campaign to “Save Angel.”³¹

May 2004	Screening of Final Episode of <i>Angel</i> on US television.
September 2004	Release of <i>Silent Hill 4</i> .
October 2005	Cinema Release of <i>Serenity</i> *.
April 2006	Cinema Release of <i>Silent Hill</i> Film.

Fig 3.1: Key events relating to *Angel* and *Silent Hill*.

I have suggested that there are a number of key similarities and potentially productive differences between *Angel* and *Silent Hill*. One key issue is the nature of their ‘seriality.’ I have referred to both *Angel* and *Silent Hill* as serial forms of entertainment, but there are key differences between the seriality of these two texts which have implications for the activity surrounding them. Neither represents what Robert Allen refers to as “true seriality” – the eternal openness which denies the possibility of closure represented by soap operas such as *As the World Turns* which has now aired more than 12,000 episodes (Warhol, 1998). *Angel* is the more conventional “series”; the prime time (albeit genre) serial “which usually contains at least one plot line that is closed off by the end of the episode, along with a few others that might be stretched over several episodes or an entire season” (Allen 1987/1992, 107). The possibility of ultimate closure is acknowledged (particularly by *Angel*’s quest for redemption), although as will be seen in the response of fans to the cancellation of the series, feared by some in the audience (‘closure’ = death).

The seriality of *Silent Hill* is more complex because of its “ergodic” nature (Aarseth, 1997). The endings of the games are to some extent open (with the possibility of multiple endings dependent on how the game has been played), but also closed (in that in each game, if the gamer is able to progress, the journey will ultimately end). The unity of the series is enhanced by the fact that whilst the games have different protagonists, there are explicit connections between characters and events across the

³¹ It would be easier perhaps, to compare the discussion of the *Silent Hill* film on SHH to COA’s responses to *Serenity* (which I discuss in Chapter 7), as the events were more clearly equivalent. Each involved a similar move across mediums (television to film, game to film), and the same move between sites of reception (from home/”small screens” to movie theatres). However, the transition from small to big screen that *Serenity* represented did not inspire the heated and more contested discourse visible within discussion of the *Silent Hill* film on SHH.

series (although this was challenged by SH4, as will be discussed in Chapter 7). Continuity between the locations within the town of Silent Hill also which helps to define the games as episodes within a broader series. Because of this linkage - by location, character, and history - all events can be seen to be situated within the same fictional universe. This becomes significant when apparent discontinuities emerge, as I will discuss in Chapter 7.

In terms of the logic of their respective genres and mediums, *Angel* and *Silent Hill* also have varying degrees of the textual elasticity which relates to the second type of openness Allen suggests is demonstrated by serials – the reversibility of events. In *Angel* and *BtVS* the fantasy/horror genre of the series entails that characters can come back from the dead (as Buffy’s resurrection at the beginning of Season 6 of *BtVS* illustrated). In fact *Angel* - as a vampire – embodies this possibility. It is unlikely that either *BtVS* or *Angel* would be able to sustain the final loss of their figurehead characters however. When playing *Silent Hill*, due to the nature of gameplay, alongside the multiple deaths within the game narratives, additional deaths and resurrections (via a re-loading of the game) are also possible.

THE SELECTION OF CONTEXTS: COA AND SHH

Both *Angel* and *Silent Hill* have inspired a diverse online fan presence (see Appendix ii.). My selection of COA and SHH from within this activity was based upon a number of criteria, relating primarily to the content of these sites and their forums, but also to my perception of the ‘health’ and sustainability of the websites; because of the longitudinal nature of my study I did not want to choose sites that would disappear early in my study.

I was aware that COA and SHH were both relatively established fan sites: COA had been online since 15 December 1999, and SHH online since 2 November 2002.³² In terms of content, the sites were similar in many ways: fan produced websites containing information about their favoured texts and housing busy forums. In order to provide an idea of the size of these forums, at the point of its closure in December 2005, the forums on COA had 1,450 registered users, 495 threaded discussions (threads) and 19,183

³² Source www.alexa.com

posted messages (posts). At the point of writing, the forums on SHH have 6,492 registered users, 7,830 threads, and 175,685 posts. The fact that each of these forums was public was also significant for ethical reasons, although as I will describe in the next chapter, the status of these sites was to change somewhat during my study.

As well as their forums, both COA and SHH house a range of content and other activities. From the homepage of COA the visitor is able to access areas which contain various types of content. These include a news page providing information about conventions and press releases; an area containing information on characters; episode guides and gallery of images; a shopping area (supported by external vendors linked to the site, offering *Angel*-related merchandise); and *The Underground*,* an area of the site open only to members of the forums.³³ SHH also houses a range of information and content alongside the forums; FAQs and guides relating to the individual games; information on characters; and links to other *Silent Hill* fan sites. The availability of this content throughout my study has, however, been less stable than that on COA, and there have been a number of redesigns. At the moment, only the forums are online pending an eagerly awaited re-launch.

On each site, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8, the activities within the forums are managed and policed by a hierarchy of owners and staff. The forums on COA were run by the COA Council – the management staff including the owner of the site “Dawn’s Kiss,” the “Senior Writer” “Swoop,” and staff members including a UK and USA “Production Staff,” and a “technical support staff.” The ownership and running of SHH is presented in less professionalised terms, with the owners Vixx and Yates working alongside moderators and administrators to run the forums.

In the previous section, I noted that I was more familiar with *Angel* than *Silent Hill*. This extended to my initial understanding of the make-up of the fan culture, and influenced my selection of COA and SHH. I had been aware of COA from the presence of “staff members” at the fan conventions I had attended. I knew that it had an established reputation as one of the main *Angel* related fan sites, a reputation underlined

³³ Whilst the COA forum is now closed, these other areas (except for the Underground) are still online. The “COAcitizens” yahoo group, linked to the site, provided a secondary source of information about the activities relating to COA, *Angel* and *BtVS*

by the apparent support the site had from the producers of *Angel* – visible in the professional appearance of the site.³⁴ In contrast, the selection of SHH involved a preliminary exploration of *Silent Hill*'s online fan culture. I initially concentrated my attention on another site, *silenthillforum.co.uk*. However, on a number of occasions during the early stage of my research, *silenthillforum.co.uk* was offline. I therefore decided to shift the focus of my research onto SHH. Whilst the forums on SHH were very similar to those on *silenthillforum.co.uk*, the site appeared more 'reliable,' and if anything, the forums appeared to be busier; this was one of the few signals that the site might stay online throughout the duration of my study. Clearly there was no guarantee of this, as the hacking of SHH was to demonstrate (see Chapter 6).

THE SELECTION OF POSTING ACTIVITY FROM COA AND SHH

All sampling serves to exclude possible data. My selection of posts from within the forums of COA and SHH relating to specific topics of discussion/activities excluded a number of areas of the forums from close attention. This localising within the total posting activity on the forums was driven by my research questions, and by events within the sites and relating to the fan objects. At the same time, due to my focus on only the written interactions within the forums, my sampling approach also involved a reduction of the 'thickness' of the modality of the data. On both sites, however, the primary mode of communication was via written text, with the use of images on COA restricted due to 'bandwidth issues.'

The literature on online environments contains various approaches to sampling within threaded discussion environments such as COA and SHH. These include using archival approaches to examine the posting activity of specific participants within a site (Rogers and Chen, 2005). My own sampling strategy focused on specific events and topics of discussion³⁵ relating to the fan objects and responses to specific events within the sites.³⁶ Because I was interested in these as *destabilising* occurrences this focus was theoretically driven. As the analysis developed, the sampling responded "in order to

³⁴ My understanding of this support is limited – garnered primarily through conversations with contacts working within the media industry.

³⁵ An approach which others have taken; e.g. Barker and Brooks' (1998) work on the release of the *Judge Dredd* film, and Baym's (2000) focus on the discussion of a specific soap-opera storyline.

³⁶ An approach also demonstrated by others; for example Zweerink and Gatson's work on the destructive impact of a 'real world' V.I.P. party on the *BtVS* forum "The Bronze" (2002, also 2004)

elaborate and build up emerging insights and theory” (Pidgeon and Henwood, 2004, 634); looking for continuities and similar topics of discussion across different parts of the sites, and across the two websites. To some extent this sampling was also responsive, reacting to events (both anticipated and unexpected) during the timeframe of the study. This process can be traced in conjunction with the shifting structure of the forums on COA and SHH.

COA

When I began looking at COA in 2003, its forums were arranged into three main boards: the *Insane Asylum*, a forum for general discussion; the *Angel Forum* for discussion of the series; and the *Help Desk*, a space for discussion of issues relating to COA and its forums. At this point I explored the site, and began to pay particular attention to discussion relating to the screening of *Angel* in the US and news of rumoured (and then confirmed) cancellation of the series. Discussion of related issues, including discussion of the future of the forums/site was also followed up.

After the cancellation of the series these three forums were integrated into a single list of threaded conversations. Use of the forum now involved scrolling down a list of conversation topics, with new threads entering at the top of the forum. I continued to follow the discussion relating to *Angel*, archiving any threads of interest.

In early 2005, the forums were again re-structured, and the *Hyperion* forums emerged (see Fig. 3.2).

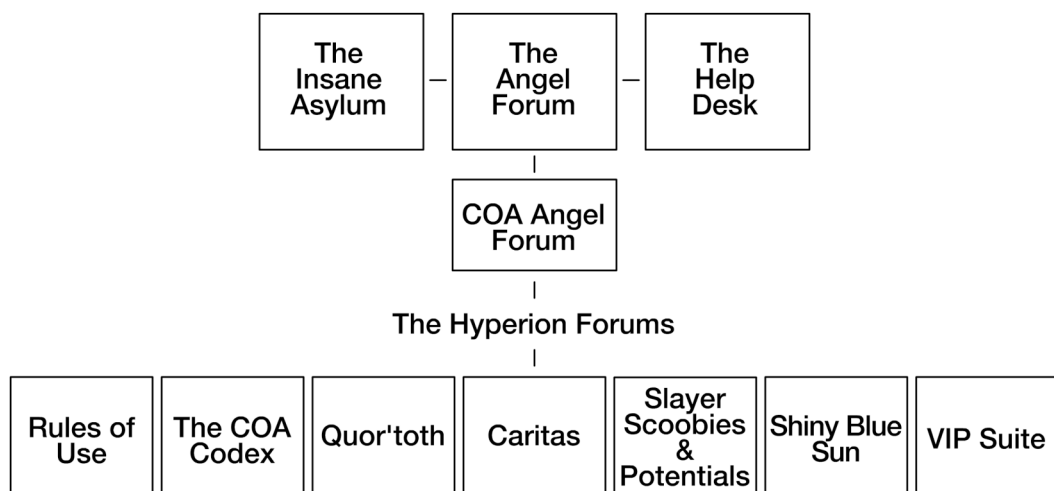


Fig. 3.2: The changing structure of the COA forums during the timeframe of my study.

The forums were now organised within a bulletin board system, which was subdivided into seven forums, details of which are presented in Appendix iii. As the description of the forums from the site demonstrates, the new *Hyperion* forums now presented the visitor with a segregated environment, organised into different areas by topic of discussion. The inclusion of forums for discussion of *BtVS*, *Firefly** and *Serenity** reflected a formalising of the expansion of topics of discussion on the site. This was significant for my study as it meant that my focus was now not only on discussion of *Angel*, but the range of “Whedonverse”* texts. The names of the forums were drawn from the series, providing points of common reference for participants; *Quor'toth* (the “what if” forum) for example, is a hell dimension within the Whedonverse, and *Caritas* is named after a karaoke bar on the show. The *Hyperion* itself is named after the hotel in which *Angel* lived and worked in Seasons 2-4. As well as a restructuring of the site, a number of features were introduced, such as “Who is online” – a display at the bottom of the front page of the forums listing the names of registered users currently logged onto the site. Because of my interest in discussion of *Angel* and, increasingly that relating to *Firefly* and *Serenity*, my primary focus within the *Hyperion* forums was on the *COA Codex* and *Shiny Blue Sun*. In the run up to the closure of the forums I examined members’ responses to the closure across the boards.

In total, the analysis presented in this thesis is based on 149 threads from COA.³⁷ These were taken from the total of 855 threads that I archived from COA during the study. These threads contain an average of 22 posts (ranging from 1 to 263 posts per thread), 3,253 posts in total.

SHH

Like COA, the forums on SHH underwent a restructuring during my study. When I first started visiting the site it was divided into three areas: *Silent Hill Central* (for discussion of *Silent Hill* related texts); *Resort Area* (containing more open discussion/creative activity), and *Midwich Elementary School* (a restricted area for the use of administrators and moderators only). These areas contained a number of different forums (see Fig. 3.3) - the description of these forums from the site can be found in Appendix iv. Here,

³⁷ These can be divided by topic/location; 92 threads from the *Angel* Forum; 11 threads relating to *Serenity*; 23 threads relating to the closure of COA from 13th-16th December 2005; 24 threads relating to general and administrative issues.

as on COA, the names of the forums are linked to the fictional universe of the fan object. *Silent Hill Centre*, the *Happy Burger* diner, the *Indian Runner* store, *Lakeside Amusement Park*, and *Midwich Elementary School* are all settings from the games, located in the town of Silent Hill.



Fig. 3.3: Structure of the SHH forums at the beginning of my study.

After an initial period of familiarisation within all of the forums, I focused my attention on the SH4 forum during the run up to and release of SH4; the *Silent Hill Movie* forum; *Daddy Help Me!* for discussion of gameplay issues; and the *Silent Hill Post Office* during periods of conflict and upheaval.

One such moment of upheaval, the hacking of the site, resulted in a relaunch of the forums in October 2005 (see Chapter 6). The forums have since been restructured again, with the addition and removal of a number of forums. By June 2006 the forums were organised into three areas: *Silent Hill Central*, *Silent Hill Media*, and *The Resort Area*. The contents of *Silent Hill Central* had changed with the removal of the *Silent Hill Movie* forum, and the addition of a new forum for *Silent Hill Origins*.³⁸ The new *Silent Hill Media* area is made up of three forums; the old *Silent Hill Movie* forum, now re-marketed as a spoiler-free zone,³⁹ and two new forums, the *SPOILERIFIC Movie Forum* for discussion of the film by those who have seen the film and therefore cannot

³⁸ *Silent Hill Origins* is a prequel game for the Sony PSP due for release in 2007 (see <http://uk.psp.ign.com/objects/826/826999.html>)

³⁹ "Haven't yet seen the movie but would still like to speculate? DO NOT POST MOVIE SPOILERS HERE!"

be spoiled*;⁴⁰ and the *Silent Hill Media* forum, a space for discussion of *Silent Hill* media other than the film. The *Resort Area* remained the same, but the *Silent Hill Historical Society* had been removed.⁴¹ These changes are illustrated in Fig. 3.4:

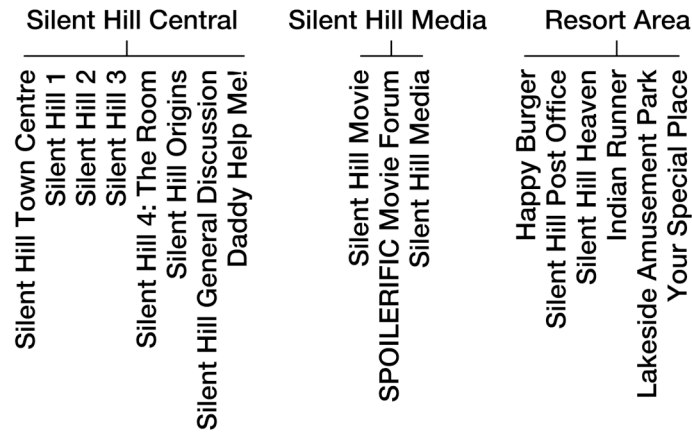


Fig. 3.4: Structure of the SHH forums as at September 2006

The introduction of the *Silent Hill Media* area incorporated members' interest in the *Silent Hill* film with related media, and introduced a separation of spoiler-free discussion of the *Silent Hill Movie* from 'spoiled' discussion. The analysis presented in this thesis draws on data from areas such as the *Silent Hill Post Office* - particularly in response to events affecting the site. My main focus however, has been the discussion within *Silent Hill Central* (and the new *Silent Hill Media* section), particularly that relating to *Silent Hill 4* and the *Silent Hill* film (in both the spoiler-free and *SPOILERIFIC* forums; these forums were my main focus during the period in which the film was released).

The analysis presented in this thesis is based on 140 threads,⁴² with a slightly higher average of posts per thread than those from COA at 29.2 (ranging from 1 to 143 posts per thread) – a total of 4092 posts.

⁴⁰ "Seen the movie? Want to talk about it? Happy to hear all the spoilers? This is the place for you!"

⁴¹ This was removed when the site went back online after the hacking in October 2005.

⁴² 18 threads relating to SH4; 49 threads relating to the *Silent Hill* film; 28 threads from *Daddy Help Me!*; 23 threads relating to the hacking; and 27 threads relating to general and administrative issues.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION ISSUES

OBSERVATION ONLINE

The thread counts presented above – the total of 7338 posts which represents approximately 4% of the total of posting activity from both sites – is the result of regular visits to COA and SHH over a two year period. These visits involved a range of activities; reading posts; following discussions and issues that interested me both within the forums and on other sites (accessed by following hypertext links); archiving threads; and keeping journals relating to both to methodological issues, and to substantive issues relating to COA and SHH. At no time throughout this period did I post a message onto the forums, or speak to any of the members of these sites (although as I describe in Chapter 4, I was to make contact with one of the owners of SHH in the aftermath of the hacking of the site).

My decision to ‘lurk’ on these sites – the ethics of which will be discussed and defended in the next chapter – pushes my research towards the “observation” end of established typologies of participation in social research (such as Gold’s observational types, see Scott and Usher, 1999, 102). Unobtrusive observation has its benefits, preventing the researcher from ‘muddying the waters’ and, Scott and Usher suggest, providing a distanced position which can prevent the researcher from being influenced by “the agendas of participants” (1999, 101). However, covert and non-interventionist approaches - where the researcher fails to take an explicit membership role within a setting (Angrosino and de Perez, 2000) - have been criticised by a number of qualitative researchers as providing a limited understanding of cultural practices. Annette Markham for example, argues:

To think about the question of participation or observation within the sphere of social science, I would begin with the premise – along with many in contemporary anthropology and interpretive sociology – that understanding what it means to be a part of any culture necessitates participation; to remain an observer is to remain distant from the experience of being-in-culture (Geertz, 1973, Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Jackson 1989). This would imply that I must participate versus observe. (Markham, 2004, 145)

The need for legitimacy via participation is granted particular importance within fan studies research, where narratives of fannish involvement are often presented by academics as they declare their “positionality” (Brooker, 2000, 4).

In the introduction to an early edited collection of academic papers on fans, for example, Lisa Lewis declares that “the authors represented in this collection are aware of their own fandom and many proclaim it loudly” (Lewis, 1992, 1). In a later book on *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* fandom, Tulloch and Jenkins present detailed autobiographical information concerning their own fan experience, and unequivocally state the importance of such direct experience:

we can come to no real understanding of that alternative system of [fans’] knowledge, or that other politics, if we simply theorize fans rather than engaging directly with their culture and their lived experience. (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995, 18)

The value of emic perspectives has continued to be emphasised in more recent work. In her PhD thesis on online gaming, for example, Constance Steinkheuler describes her:

emphasis on the ‘participation’ part [of participant observation] as I consider myself a gamer first, games researcher second and do strongly believe that the only way to understand gaming cultures on their own terms is to legitimately participate in them (Steinkheuler, 2005, 63).

The celebration of researchers’ own personal fan interests in this work has resulted in some anxiety about the position of fan/games studies in relation to other academic fields (see Copier, 2003). Such emic positioning is typically used to establish the legitimacy of researchers’ understanding of, and right to speak for, fans and gamers.

As seen in Pierre Bourdieu’s key work in this area (1984, 2000), the ‘objective’ position of the academic gaze has long been questioned. The privileging of a subjective fannish perspective within fan studies research can be considered as part of a broad move towards ‘the self’ in social science research; away from the study of ‘alien’ cultures, to the study of researcher’s children, to ourselves and our own lives and interests. An early example of this can be found in the preface to Ann Oakley’s study, *Housewife*, where Oakley thanks her family “for the experience of my own oppression as a housewife. Without this, I would never have wanted to write the book in the first place” (Oakley, 1974, x). More recently it has been seen in the development and influence of autoethnographic approaches to research, and Maton’s characterisation of “knower” modes of legitimation within cultural studies (Maton, 2000, 2003).

Rather than hiding their perspectives in what Donna Haraway terms the “god trick” of objective scientific knowledge, fan studies researchers have often presented personalised and localised perspectives – perspectives which are thus both “particular” and “embodied” (Haraway, 1991, 189). This becomes problematic when researchers go

beyond this, suggesting that they can legitimately speak for other fans (or gamers) by virtue of their own experience (something that Kurt Lancaster, for example, does explicitly, 2001). Taken to an extreme, this would suggest that the only people who can legitimately research fans are fans. Here, in a similar way to Sanvoss's criticisms of the attention paid to specific forms of fan productivity in the previous chapter, the over-reliance on an extreme fan or gamer identity in order to legitimate (and exclude) others can be challenged by asking to what extent this sort of prolonged fannish involvement matches up with the experience of other participants and more casual fan members of these sites. Short-term involvement might be preferred, for example; in the terms presented in some fan studies research this might exclude such members from being deemed legitimate fans.

Whilst recognising my own 'fannish' experience both in relation to my interest in carrying out the study, selection of the sites, and my understanding of the data (to some extent), I am also aiming for a more distanced reading of activity in respect of my analysis. The generation of analytical schemas provides one such way of doing this, addressing a difficulty relating to the comparison of different sites of practices that Mary Douglas noted in *Natural Symbols*; the "problem of holding other variables steady while we compare a piece of behaviour in one culture with a parallel one in another [...]" (Douglas, 1970/2003, xxxv). She argues that "without some method, the cross-cultural comparison falls to the ground and with it the whole interest of [the] exercise" (1970/2003, xxxvi) – calling for a level of objectivity via method in the handling of the analysis. The generation of a language of description enables such moves across settings.

At the same time, my observation of the COA and SHH forums was supplemented by a range of activities, including playing *Silent Hill 4*, watching *Angel*, and going to the cinema to see *Serenity* and *Silent Hill*. These activities (to some extent a continuation of my earlier fan interest in these texts) now took on additional significance for my study as they enabled me to follow the discussion on the forums. Rather than relying on first-hand experience, it would have been possible to acquire this understanding of the texts in alternative ways, such as by speaking to members of COA and SHH. On the basis of my observation, however, I am certain that had I posted numerous requests for information I would have generated a great deal of ill feeling on the boards. The

responsibility to experience these texts was thus a necessary part of the research process.⁴³

THE RELIANCE ON ONLINE DATA: THE ABSENCE OF SPEAKING SUBJECTS

Another key issue relating to the nature of my involvement with COA and SHH, is the fact that I relied wholly on online data sources and did not contact any of the ‘real’ members of the sites. There is increasing interest in collaborative research and in “the transformation of the erstwhile ‘subjects’ of research into [...] collaborative partners” (Argosino and de Perez, 2000, 678; these authors are referring specifically to ethnographic research but this extends more broadly). This is seen in the use of extracts of posts as if the voices of participants speak for themselves (e.g Gatson and Zweerink, 2004b). Rather than entering into a relationship with research subjects in this way, and attempting to gauge how they make sense of these sites, my focus throughout the study was on textually rendered posting activity.

In respect of my own study and the questions I seek to explore, this form of involvement with the sites can be defended in terms of “fitness for purpose” (Scott and Usher, 1999, 99); the manner of data collection reflecting the way that I am approaching the work and conceptualising the activity within the sites. Fitness for purpose can be demonstrated in respect of Williams’ (2004) paper on spoiler sites and hierarchy introduced in Chapter 2. This paper is to some extent methodologically limited in that, whilst it makes some reference to the formal exclusionary features of spoiler sites, it is primarily based on questionnaire data (the voiced opinions of fans, their perceptions of, and attitudes towards, spoilers and spoiler-providers, and their motivations for the choice of specific forms of consumption of *BtVS*). The limitations of this reliance on self-reporting is raised by Williams herself. Having noted the potential discrepancy between what fans say and do, she suggests a discourse analysis next-stage approach which would enable her to examine the fans claims in the light of their online activity:

This would highlight whether the comments that fans post on-line belies their performance as egalitarian and non-hierarchical and undermines the answers they give when presenting themselves and their fandoms to a researcher. (Williams, 2004, no page nos.)

⁴³ Such annoyance was visible when an influx of newbies to SHH following the release of the *Silent Hill* film provoked criticism by asking numerous questions about the series (see Chapter 9).

In relation to the questions I am seeking to explore, the reliance on online data can be justified as it is the online activity that is the focus of my interest. Like Williams, I am aware that this means that there are questions I cannot answer. If I had interviewed participants, however, I would not have moved nearer to the ‘truth’; I would merely have set up another research context.

If the researcher is interested in engaging “with the virtual world as a thing to be seriously reckoned with” (Taylor, 1999, 4), then the online environment can serve as a research site. At this point however, another potentially problematic issue arises; the issue of verifiability in the context of online environments. As my discussion of identity in Chapter 5 will suggest, this issue again relates to the absence of contact with ‘real’ physical subjects in cyberspace; subjects who may appear to provide an authenticating point of reference in relation to, for example, identity markers such as age, gender, and race. This fuels uncertainties which bear on the ethical decisions made when researching online (see Chapter 4) and relates to a key question first posed by Sherry Turkle (1996) and recently rephrased by T.L. Taylor; “Does it matter [...] that you do not know all the identities/bodies a given participant has?” (Taylor, 1999, no page nos.).

Here, again, I would argue that the degree to which this is significant depends on the research question; to some extent it does not matter if posters are mis-representing their ‘true’ selves on COA and SHH, as my interest is in their utterances. A number of researchers have, however, responded to such concerns by challenging the distinction between on and offline experience, undermining the idea that “seemingly unproblematic, embodied encounters yield totally unambiguous information regarding personal identity” (Lyman and Wakeford, 1999, 364). Judith Donath has noted that both online and off, the researcher is involved in attributing unity, transforming “fragmentary structure [...] into the completeness of an individuality” (Donath, 2000, 303). Annette Markham notes that quandaries about identity and agency are “apparent in any research context” (Markham, 2003, no page nos.), and (in respect of the potential for deception in online interviews) T.L Taylor has noted that; “There are many things that in even an off-line interview we must take at the interviewee’s word” (Taylor, 1999, no page nos.).

Despite the claims of those who propose that communicative cues within online environments are reduced and limited, my decision to focus solely on online activity did not mean that I was starved of information, indeed the opposite (for a discussion of observation in online and offline environments see Whiteman, 2003). On both COA and SHH, I was able to access a range of what Spradley has termed “dimensions of descriptive observation” (see Robson, 2002, 320) - including space, events, time, actors, activities, objects - which were initially defined in relation to offline settings. The final two dimensions Spradley proposes – ‘goals’ and ‘feelings’ – are potentially as problematic in face-to-face interactions as they are online. There was, of course, uncertainty about the nature of the participants, and this uncertainty is reflected in my presentation of data within this thesis. I have attempted to ensure that I do not fall back on gendered essentialising in my discussion of participants, although the use of gendered pronouns is often difficult to avoid both because alternative approaches (s/he, they) are somewhat ungainly, and because I have formed ideas of who the participants ‘are’ that are sometimes difficult to shake. Uncertainty is also increased by the name changes of a number of participants. For example two of the SHH moderators changed their usernames during my study; ‘Miss Krissy’ becoming ‘Krist’; and ‘The Adversary’ becoming ‘St Thomas’ (see Chapter 6 for further discussion of the instability of usernames). Where important, I have made the connections between usernames explicit in the analysis.

Despite these difficulties, the most pressing problem was often not the nature of the data, or quality of the observational experience, but the status of this material in terms of its durability (and vulnerability). This was to present its own challenges, which I will now consider in relation to my approach to archiving.

ARCHIVING

The plenitude of easily accessible and observable data on the Internet has been regarded as one of the main advantages of Internet based research for those interested in media audiences. The particular materiality of this data, ephemeral but also durable (Hine, 2000), presents a number of advantages in relation to data collection. The researcher does not need to spend time transcribing interviews, or videotaping and then transcribing observed behaviour (one of the advantages of cmc research identified by

Mann and Stewart, 2000), and such data can be regarded as (at least initially) ‘untainted’ by the intervention of the researcher. The stability of this data cannot, however, be taken for granted. The problems of dealing with the “fleeting” permanence of websites (Foot and Schneider, 2004) introduce particular problems for archiving.

My own archiving strategy in relation to SHH and COA is significant because it constituted a key aspect of the way in which I defined the boundaries of these hypertext environments as my objects of study (Lyman, 2003). I was aware from the beginning that the posting activity within SHH and COA was to some extent unstable. Before the introduction of the *Hyperion* forums on COA, for example, the *Angel* did not archive old threads; these were lost once pushed off the boards by new messages. On SHH, a ‘spring clean’ of the forums (referred to as a “forum flush”) in April 2005 deleted a significant number of threads. The importance of archiving the posting activity in order to ensure the durability of the data was clear. The development of my approach to archiving reflected my increasing understanding of the nature of the environments and the available technologies for recording online activity.

Throughout the study I have used a range of archiving strategies that have proved to have their own characteristic benefits and limitations. When I was interested in capturing the visual nature or layout of the forum activity or web content, I saved web pages as individual html files. These serve as static snapshots of the sites, capturing the page ‘as seen’ and include images, but not moving images/animations.

I also used archiving software, which enables researchers to download a ‘total archive’ of individual websites. The benefit of this approach is that it achieves a replication of the forums as a whole, capturing the context, and moving images etc, and, significantly, enables offline ‘surfing.’ I first attempted to archive the forums on COA in this way using the software programme WebWacker, but later discovered another programme - Offline Explorer Pro – which I found to be far more user-friendly. Using Offline Explorer I downloaded an archive of the SHH website in September 2005; this proved invaluable a month later when the site was hacked. Whilst this did not provide a complete version of the site – as there are limitations in terms of the levels of the website that can be archived – it did provide a good capturing of the activity.

Whilst I had a relatively ‘complete’ archive of activity from the SHH forums by November 2005, I did not have an equivalent for COA. This was because the owners had introduced a sign-in requirement in order to access the forums which preventing archiving in this way. I thus relied heavily on a third strategy for archiving data (which I also used for SHH); archiving individual threads by saving them as text files. This had one particular practical advantage, enabling me to print out the threads for analysis (otherwise the text appeared as white font on a black background). This way of archiving data is time consuming, particularly in comparison with the use of archiving software. It does mean, however, that the researcher gets to know the data rather better as each thread is looked at, copied, and saved individually. I archived 855 threads from COA and 519 threads from SHH in this way, saving them in folders which replicated their forum locations. As I noted in my discussion of sampling, this approach involved a reduction in the richness of the data - removing the images, for example - and reducing them to textual interactions.

Despite the technologically-mediated nature of COA and SHH, these different approaches to archiving – which provided snapshots of pages from the sites, imperfect clones of the forums, and individual records of written interactions – are similar to data collection strategies in ‘real world’ research. In classroom observation for example, a similar reduction or capturing of modality and experience would occur through the use of videotape, audio recording, or the use of transcriptions. One other key concern in respect of archiving internet activity, the “temporal dimension” of archiving websites (Lyman, 2003), also resonates with offline research. The points at which I archived threads might not have been the ‘end’ of these discussions, with data recorded (and lost) at the point of preservation. Whilst this meant that unless a thread was closed at the point of archiving, I may have missed interesting posts, I would have been in the same position had I been engaged with fieldwork within an offline environment where activity almost certainly would have continued after I had left the scene.

3.5 THE PROCESS OF ANALYSIS

In this section I want to attempt to outline my approach to analysis. In doing so, it is helpful to consider how my work corresponds with and differs from ‘grounded theory’ approaches. Whilst I did not adhere to the framework presented within the grounded

theory approach of, for example, Strauss and Corbin (1990), I undertook a similar process of immersion within empirical material and generation of analytical distinctions from the data. However, I also recruited elements of an existing language, Social Activity Theory, in analysing the data. For this reason, the conceptual language presented in the analysis chapters both emerged from the data and was placed onto it.

The issues presented in the previous sections – sampling, data collection, and archiving etc – entailed a process of data reduction (Scott and Usher, 1999). The process of analysis involved a corresponding localising movement. During an initial period of familiarisation I attempted to mark out key issues, events, questions and posters as well as to begin to identify points of conflict, and alliances within the activity. This was followed by a more intensive period of closer textual analysis of the forum activity, examining both the content and style of posts, and exploring the marking out of continuities and discontinuities within the interactions. These moves fed into my analysis of how posters mark out polarised dispositions (in relation to the fan objects, for example). From examining these positions I generated and developed a number of analytical distinctions; these emerged from my engagement with both data and literature. At the same time, however, whilst engaging with the data in this way, I also asked a number of more mechanical questions of the two sites, recruiting existing theoretical language and analytical distinctions from antecedent work.

As in Strauss and Corbin’s work, my approach to analysis was therefore dialogic – involving moves between empirical material, developing theory and theoretical antecedents. My handling of the data from COA and SHH can also be seen as akin to Strauss and Corbin’s description of *constant comparison* which they describe “as a stimulus to theoretical sensitivity” (1990, 84). Pidgeon and Henwood describe how this:

involves continually sifting and comparing elements (basic data instances, emergent concepts, cases, or theoretical propositions) throughout the lifetime of the project. (Pidgeon and Henwood, 2004, 637)

In relation to my own study this has involved movement between elements of the sites and between settings in order to explore more data and to validate and/or develop the analysis.

The dialogic approach taken is central to the generation of a language of description as presented by Brown and Dowling (1998). The development of this language, which enables the researcher to make statements about different empirical contexts, is presented by Dowling as involving an “equilibrating” move between the empirical and theoretical domains (1998); Dowling is here recontextualising a term from the educational theory of Jean Piaget (see Chapter 5). The emergent language provides a “technology” which can then be deployed in the analysis of empirical texts other than those involved in the generation of the language. This deployment through engagement with the (new) empirical is not a one-way application, but introduces the possibility of further development of the language; revealing for example, absences in the existing language. In Piagetian terms (again, recontextualised), the new is “disequilibrating,” provoking the need for further equilibration. The language of description is therefore not a static tool, but is always in the process of learning.

To illustrate the development of this conceptual language I will refer to part of the analysis presented later in this thesis. In Chapter 7, I examine positions that fans mark out in relation to the objects of fan attention and make a distinction between *earnest* and *sceptical* modes of identification. The principal source for this distinction was the data; the nature of oppositions within posting activity. However the analysis was also informed by a theoretical precedent; Goffman’s distinction between the “sincere” and “cynical” belief of the performer “in his own act” (Goffman, 1959, 28). As I will discuss in Chapter 7, my conceptualisation of an earnest/sceptical opposition is very different to Goffman’s sincere/cynical distinction. His work was an important influence however, as it served to sensitise the analysis.

Initially, the earnest/sceptical distinction formed one side of a cross-product which opened up a relational space relating to modes of identification; this related to whether posters referenced local/general aspects of the texts when taking earnest/sceptical positions in relation to the fan objects (this will be explained in detail in Chapter 7). As I engaged with the data using this language – moving between settings and into new areas of the activity – I realised that the schema had a poor grip on the data, and that I need to take a step back to focus on what the analysis was doing.

This led me to rework this schema; replacing the distinction between earnest/sceptical identification with a distinction between *suturing* and *rupturing* moves. The former distinction had, I felt, been overly general (relating to broad states of being in relation to the objects); this had led to some confusion in my resulting description of the activity using these terms. Exploring suturing/rupturing moves (and to what they referred), enabled me to demonstrate how earnest/sceptical modes of identification (at a higher level of analysis) were established, maintained, and challenged. This step back improved the sensitivity of the analysis.

In this example, the language emerged from my engagement with the data and theory. In other parts of the thesis, however, I have recruited pre-existing analytical language, external to my own data. The analysis of authority and expertise presented in Chapter 8, for example, involves the recruitment of an analytical schema relating to modes of authority action (Dowling, 2001, 2004a, in press). In contrast to my development of analytical language in respect of the earnest/sceptical distinction, the recruitment of this schema represents a relatively stable use of an existing language.

In Chapters 6 and 9 my approach to analysis is slightly different. In these chapters the trajectory of responses to key events relating both to the fan sites and fan objects are used in order to organise the presentation of the analysis. Activity is examined sequentially, in response to critical cases, rather than different positions within the totality of activity (although of course, at a closer level of analysis, the stabilising/destabilising moves and positioning discussed in Chapters 7 and 8 is also part of broader sequences of interactions on the forums).

In the four analysis chapters, I have attempted to demonstrate the reliability of my reading of the data and coding via *elaborated description* (Brown and Dowling, 1998); presenting the emerging conceptual framework in reference to examples of data. Brown and Dowling describe this as the elaboration of theoretical propositions “through the use of concrete [empirical] illustrations” in a way that “brings the theoretical and empirical spheres closer together” and thus serves to establish the validity of coding (Brown and Dowling, 1998, 28). This approach serves as a strategy for establishing the reliability of the “empirical measurement of theoretical propositions” (28) which is set in contrast to the provision of “explicit rules for the recognition of indicators” or precoding (28).

The close textual analysis that I have conducted means that only part of the total data has been referred to in this thesis. The selection of the data presented is intended to reveal the process of coding and interpretation to the gaze of the reader. There is also some differentiation between the amount of data presented in the four analysis chapters; Chapter 6, for example, contains less data than Chapters 7-9. This variability is due to the need to explicate the distinctions or claims being made, and the fact that Chapter 6 is somewhat more narrative driven than the following chapters.

Cross-products have been used to present the language that I have recruited and developed. One example is the modes of authority action (Dowling, 2004a) schema, mentioned above, which I use in Chapter 8 (see Fig. 3.5).

Category of author	Field of Practice	
	Open	Closed
Closed	Charismatic	Traditional
Open	Liberal	Bureaucratic

Fig. 3.5: Modes of authority action (Dowling, 2004a)

These schemas are not intended to provided categories in which to file types of behaviour or posters, but rather open up relational spaces for examining the moves that are being made within these sites. These schemas also provide frameworks which enable me to hold up COA and SHH for comparison.

3.6 CONCLUSION

As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, the nature of my research – involving observation and fieldwork in online settings and recruiting both established and more recently developed techniques – was in many ways a hybrid project, involving what Denzin might term a ‘bricolage’ of tools, techniques and influences. Constructive description provides a more systematic conceptualisation of the research process than the idea of research as bricolage however, and has provided an important framework for my work.

My engagement with the sampled threads from COA and SHH has involved an attempt to generate and develop my own theoretical language with which to describe the activity; a language that might also be useful in the analysis of other empirical texts. This has involved moves between my research questions, empirical data, and related literature. Because of my choice of contrasting cases, it has also involved moves across sites. The language that I have developed and recruited enables me to produce readings of these sites, but also to go beyond them.

The nature of my involvement with COA and SHH, and configuration of the interactions on these forums as textual posting activity, goes against influential moves in fan studies research which emphasise the importance of ‘full’ participation and insider perspectives (although as will be discussed in the next chapter, others have taken similar approaches to the textual analysis of online fan activity). The attempt to develop a language of description involves a distancing from the empirical practices – this, as I have suggested, is important as it enables moves across settings. In contrast, the privileging of emic fan perspectives and the understanding of fan experience by researchers, involves the privileging of the perspective of a knowing (fan) subject. Whilst this perspective may be valuable, the difficulty is the extent to which this might be taken to extremes, whereby only those who are fans can carry out research. This humanistic approach is also seen in the privileging of participants’ perspectives in research. These voices and approaches to data collection are clearly important in relation to the exploration of particular questions, but of lesser significance to the questions I have sought to explore.

In presenting the process of my research I have situated my work in relation to the body of research methods writing concerned with online practice. This work deals with a range of issues relating to research in online environments, including the central issue of online fieldwork, and demonstrates different perspectives “on the spatiality of research methods” (Hine, 2005b). The challenges of such environments involve the need to resist artificially binding off segments of Internet activity without falling into the trap of attempting to maintain; “an impossible position [...] namely the position of being ‘everywhere’” (Ang, 1996, 73). Ang discusses this “impossible position” in relation to the “infinity of intercontextuality” in audience studies but it is equally applicable to the challenges of engaging with online environments. In considering these challenges it is

also important to recognise the continuity of issues between research in on and offline domains. Consideration of this literature is developed in the next chapter, which engages with the ethical decisions I have made in relation to these sites. Here, contingent issues relating to lurking, archiving, hacking, and so forth, will introduce different challenges.

CHAPTER 4: METHODS II: ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING AN ETHICAL STANCE IN RELATION TO INTERNET RESEARCH

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The response of researchers to the ethical challenges of online research can be found both in moves towards the establishment of broad ethical guidelines for research practice (see Sharf 1999; Ess, 2001; Walther, 2002; Haigh and Jones, 2005), and in the personal narratives of ethical decision making by individual researchers in relation to their own research questions and contexts (for examples see Reid, 1996; Eichhorn, 2001; Smith, 2004). In these moves towards determining ethical positions in relation to the new research contexts of the Internet, we find attempts to deal with the issues that populate what Maria Bakardjieva and Andrew Feenberg (2001) term the “grey areas” of Internet research. These include questions relating to the public/private distinction, the difficulty of verifying data and establishing the validity of interpretations (in relation to age/gender etc) due to the “indefinability” of human subjects online (Jacobson, 1999), and related opportunities for identity deception both by and of the researcher due to the reliance on the ‘virtual’ avatar rather than physical body online (the possibilities for such deception illustrated by the documentation of deception cases in Internet history - see Stone, 1991; Turkle, 1997; Berman and Bruckman, 2001).

Rather than attempting to provide a summary of the ethical issues relating to Internet research (examples of which can be found elsewhere; see Knobel, 2002; McIntyre, 2003; Jones, 2004), in this chapter I draw from the methods literature in order to position the ethical stance I have taken in relation to my own research project. The unstable nature of COA and SHH meant that this stance was by necessity born out of my responses to a number of (often unexpected) events throughout the timeframe of the study. These responses were, however, informed by the literature. Two contested issues from within this work are of particular interest here; the heated and ongoing debate regarding the appropriateness of covert research in online environments, and the rights and responsibilities of researchers when using data sourced from such settings. Before examining these debates, I will briefly consider moves towards contextualised ethical stances in Internet research; moves which have particular relevance for those defending the right to carry out ‘covert’ observation in cyberspace.

4.2 LOCALISING ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

The ethical approach I have taken corresponds with moves in the research literature towards contextualising approaches to the study of online environments. The emphasis in much recent work has been on challenging ‘monolithic’ pronouncements of ethical conduct (Walther, 2002) in favour of varying interpretations of ‘ethical pluralism’ (Ess, 2002) and “context sensitivity” (Markham, 2003). Such arguments suggest that our decisions should be informed by the cultures we study (see Cavanagh 1999, also Hine, AOIR conference notes, 2004), and the technologies that we are engaging with (Roberts et al, 2003)). This proposes a situated, localised approach to ethical decision making (Knobel, 2002).

The distinction between the general and local is at the heart of a number of recent critiques of the refusal by official university and research bodies such as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in the U.S. to grant permission for Internet-based research projects (see Johns et al, 2004). Central to the criticism of such decisions, is the charge that these bodies fail to understand the particular nature of the settings within which researchers seek to engage, and instead draw on misplaced general preconceptions. Johns et al suggest that:

Lack of understanding of the formal features of computer-mediated communication has left some IRB members confused when evaluating research proposals which seek to apply traditional research methods in the virtual realm. (Johns et al, 2004, 112)

These authors go on to argue that “IRB regulations, and those who interpret them, are firmly grounded in the literate culture of paper and print” (119). Similarly, Joseph Walther’s discussion of a report on ethical practice by the National Institute of Health and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, argues that the report:

tends to characterize ‘Internet research’ in a more or less monolithic way, as though the issues it considers pertain to most kinds of research conducted online[...] Taking the report seriously may lead an IRB to require assurances from investigators that are impertinent, irrelevant, impossible, and unwieldy, depending on the nature and methodology of the specific study being proposed. (see Walther, 2002, 207)

In contrast, the move from a pre-imposed ethical checklist to localised and contextualised ethical decision making proposes a tailored approach towards “locally produced” definitions of ethical conduct (Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2001) based on “concrete examples” (Allen, 1996).

The production of such localised definitions is presented in the research literature as occurring at different levels of operationalisation, across different aspects of the research process, and in relation both to the object of research and to the interests of the researcher. At the level of empirical setting for example, this localising move (and resulting destabilisation and fragmentation of ethical ‘rules’) can be seen in the rejection of conceptualisations of the private/public distinction as “uni-dimensional, rigidly dichotomous and absolute, fixed and universal” (Marx, 2001, 160), in favour of the configuring of this relationship as:

multi-dimensional (with dimensions sometimes overlapping or blurred and at other times cross cutting or oppositional), continuous and relative, fluid and situational or contextual, whose meaning lies in how they are interpreted and framed. (Marx, 2001, 160)

This suggests that in defining the status of research settings, researchers should take into account the complex and dynamic nature of technologies and environments, and the activities they support.

The instability of COA and SHH during the timeframe of my study serves as a good example of this. When I began my data collection in 2004, both COA and SHH contained publicly accessible forums. Posts within these forums could be accessed without recourse to password entry points, and posters had no control over who read their messages once they had ‘posted’ to the boards. The public nature of these settings, and lack of the need to register membership in order to see the posts, strongly influenced my ethical approach to these sites. Whilst I wouldn’t reproduce a message sent in private email correspondence without the consent of the author - as the medium seems to attribute a firm (if perhaps illusory) sense of privacy - I decided that I would quote from these publicly accessible forums without asking for the consent of the participants. The public domain status of the COA and SHH forums also informed my decision to name the sites⁴⁴ and to use the original usernames from these settings; a stance which has been taken by other fan studies researchers working in similar

⁴⁴ In identifying these sites I have already committed what some Internet researchers regard as a cardinal error/sin. See King, 1996, who privileges the need to anonymise research settings as the key ethical move in Internet research - enabling a balancing of the ideal of informed consent with the simultaneous need to minimise disruption to settings - and is critical of academics who have named research settings. The repercussions of anonymising the sites (as Lori Kendall did with her 2002 study of the MUD ‘Bluesky’) might be considered further. If I were to anonymise the sites I would, perhaps, also have to anonymise the TV series and the game. Kendall changed the name but her site was an online pub - the content of interest not as specific as the *Silent Hill* and *Angel* texts.

environments (including Jenkins, 1995; Baym, 2000; Hills, 2005; Gatson and Zweerink 2004).

The artificiality of the usernames on COA and SHH serves to shield the identities of ‘real’ authors in a way that I have tried to continue by not, for example, presenting any of the personal information that is available on (or via) these sites (information such as email addresses and members’ MySpace* and LiveJournal* details). It would be possible for the reader to learn more about the identities of the members of SHH that I have cited by visiting the forum. However, they would only be able to obtain information presented by those members and - as pages from the forum cannot be accessed from the data presented via the use of a search engine such as Google⁴⁵ - this would involve time and effort. The fact that some of the data presented comes from an old (pre-hack, and no longer accessible) version of SHH, means that this effort might be futile. The closure of the COA forums in December 2005 means that none of the data from COA can be traced, as the forum no longer ‘exists.’

Despite these technical barriers to tracing the users cited in the thesis, the decision to name the sites and usernames is still a serious and - in some quarters - controversial one. The need to act professionally, and in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association (BSA), meant that it was not taken lightly. The BSA’s code is similar to some of the work I have already referenced in promoting considered and localised decision-making. Against a backdrop of changing processes of regulation, and the increasing bureaucratisation of ethical decision making in the UK,⁴⁶ the BSA acknowledges the importance of localised ethical practice in its emphasis on education and deliberation, rather than the provision of “a set of recipes for resolving ethical choices or dilemmas” (BSA, 2002). In consideration of issues relating to anonymity, privacy and confidentiality, it takes a considered but non-committal stance to the complexities of Internet based research, placing the onus on the researcher to define their own stance. The BSA guidelines stress the particular case of public environments in relation to the importance of defending the anonymity and privacy of participants, stating that:

⁴⁵ I am unsure as to the reason for this; many forums are not currently searchable/searched by Google.

⁴⁶ The development of ESRC (2005) Research Ethics Framework is one example of this.

There may be fewer compelling grounds for extending guarantees of privacy or confidentiality to public organisations, collectivises, governments, officials or agencies than to individuals or small groups. (BSA, 2002)

When my research began, COA and SHH could clearly be thought of as public “collectivises.” Even within these two forums however, this ‘public-ness’ was not all encompassing, and as the sites developed, restrictions were placed on access. This served to demonstrate the hybrid nature of these sites in terms of the public/private distinction, and the need to re-define ethical decisions in response to the development of the settings over time.

As well as the public areas of the forums for example, both COA and SHH contained gated spaces (*The Underground Area* on COA, and the *Faculty Room* and *Library Reserve Room* on SHH), which required registration or a particular level of status/membership for access, and thus might not be regarded as ‘public’ in the same way or to the same extent as the forums. Access to these areas could be further differentiated. In the *Underground Area* on COA for example, ‘citizenship’ could be achieved by simply registering and remained relatively ‘open’, whereas in the restricted access SHH rooms, a degree of status within the site was required in order to enter (as moderator, administrator etc). This served to complicate the public/private distinction in relation to this site; however as these areas were not central to my research, I focused my data collection efforts on the main ‘public’ boards.

The status of these main forums underwent some change, however. In June 2005, COA introduced a log-on page for those wishing to view/access the boards and the posts within them. The introduction of this new entry point forced me to reconsider my handling of data from the site. Whilst the forums still remained ‘public’ (as anyone with an email address could register) and the registration terms did not mention copyright or a request for information from members as to their intentions in engaging with the site, the log-on page appeared to reflect a certain degree of ‘privatising’ of the content of the forums. I therefore decided to divide my archive of threads from the forums into pre-and-post log-on sections. The repercussions of this change were complicated further by the closure of COA in December 2005. This meant that the interactions were now inaccessible, no longer public, but lost. Because of this, I have used the data from each archive in the same way, without making reference to the

differentiation between them (it would have been possible to present analysis of the data in separate chapters, treating the sites as separate cases and anonymising some of the data).

In May 2006, SHH also ‘privatised’ part of its forums in this way – closing off the part of the site which contains the general discussion and explicitly community-related forums (such as the *Happy Burger*, *Lakeside Amusement Park*, and *Silent Hill Post Office*) to non-members. Indeed non-members now visiting the forum would not be aware that these forums are there; the forums are only visible upon logging on. The registration on SHH is - as on COA – ‘open’ (unlike sites which require an email to ask for membership etc). As my interest in this thesis is primarily in the *Silent Hill Central* and *Silent Hill Media* forums, which contain discussion of the *Silent Hill* texts, this development had little impact on the decisions I have made. However, in terms of data collection, I have again marked this difference as a separation; archiving any data from the pre-log on *Silent Hill Post Office* (for example) separately from the old ‘totally’ public *Post Office* forum.

Here, COA and SHH serve to demonstrate the complexity of defining the status of sites in relation to the public/private distinction (a distinction which will be examined in further detail in the next section). Along with the public/private issue in relation to access, the subject matter (or the content of the setting) presents another level of varying sensitivity in respect of the empirical settings. We might imagine, for example, that a support group might be more vulnerable than the sort of fan communities that I am studying.

Hills’ consideration of the awareness of the (public) audience in the “self-representation and self-performance of audience-as-text” (Hills, 2002, 177) within fan communities, offers support to this sort of differentiation. Hills emphasises the authored (and attention seeking) nature of interactions within such sites, suggesting they:

“[...] are thoroughly rather than contingently textual insofar as they are composed with an imagined audience in mind (cf. Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 88) and are thus always already claims for attention prior to any academic scrutiny.” (Hills, 2002, 176).

Reference to other interest groups provides different illustrations of the way that subject matter may differentiate the ways researchers approach such settings. For example,

whilst it might be easier (indeed necessary) to support covert research in the study of a hate group, it might be more difficult to defend the covert study of health related discussion boards such as the autism discussion groups Charlotte Brownlow and Nancy O'Dell studied, the authors suggesting that such groups are “the most vulnerable populations” on the Internet (Brownlow and O'Dell, 2002). If I were examining such settings, my own decisions might perhaps have been different. In such a situation, I would have been more likely, I think, to have contacted the owners to notify them of my interest, perhaps requesting the opportunity to set up a forum or thread relating to the research project so that anyone taking part within the discussion within that part of the site would have been granting permission to use the data (an approach taken by Ito et al in their study of Seniornet, 2001).

The move towards localisation does not merely focus on the research setting, but also on the approach of the researcher, and her/his research project: the mode of data collection and analysis, for example. Walther (2002) argues that content or discourse analysis reveals less about the participants than, for example, survey information (as focus is on form of expression rather than information). A differing example of this is seen in Roberts et al (2003), where the authors discuss how their desire to interview participants in a MOO meant that they had to get informed consent from the participants. They contrast this to more ‘passive’ modes of data collection such as archival research and suggest that the handling of archival data is more problematic ‘ethically.’ Such arguments suggest (the rather obvious point perhaps) that different research designs contain more or less potential opportunity for harm. Sixsmith and Murray suggest that:

documentary research on email posts and archives has its own dynamics and generates specific issues that need to be discussed within the research community. (Sixsmith and Murray, 2001, no page nos.).

From this perspective, looking might be considered less intrusive than interfering (in the form of, say, experimental designs).

Again, such distinctions have informed my own stance in relation to COA and SHH. If I had wanted to take part in interactions on the forums, my decision not to notify members of my research interest may have been different. My openness towards observation in public forums was informed by my non-intervention on the sites: a distinction between covert observation and covert participation, the latter of which is

(potentially) more problematic, although the former still needs to be defended (as I shall discuss in the next section).

The researcher's meta-theoretical approach and disciplinary perspective is also important in defining an ethical approach. Bakardjieva and Feenberg (2000) suggest that contrasting types of research⁴⁷ - which involve differing configurations of the relationship between researcher and subject - raise different ethical issues. And White (2002a) distinguishes between the disciplinary differences between humanities and sociological research. Finally, even the geographic location of the researcher might be seen to influence the researcher's stance. The Association of Internet Researchers' (AOIR) 2001 report for example, describes the difference between US and Norwegian ethical guidelines, with Charles Ess (2001) suggesting that the European perspective on ethics is deontological (focusing on process) whilst the American perspective is utilitarian (focusing on the impact of decisions on research subjects).

The different levels of ethical operationalisation presented here represent attempts to reconcile general concerns relating to the responsibility of researchers, the protection of research subjects, and status of data etc, with the characteristics of particular contexts/interests. These moves deny the legitimacy of a 'one size fits all' approach to research ethics. It is significant however, that in examining this literature we find that an awareness of plurality of approaches and emphasis on the contextualisation and localisation of ethical practice, does not free this work from the influence of 'shoulds' or from moralised value judgements. Here the shift between localising and generalising strategies in the literature exhibits different strategies in relation to the relationship between the empirical and theoretical fields. Whilst general statements conceal the empirical by privileging key protocols and values for example, in the localised approaches to ethics where the focus is on the pragmatic, the general underpinnings may need to be uncovered but are always influential.

⁴⁷These are: Naturalistic, Participatory, Consensual/Understanding, and Critical Research (see Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2000, 237)

4.3 IN DEFENCE OF COVERT OBSERVATION

Alongside the negotiation and conceptualisation of rights and responsibilities in the ethical guidelines and personal narratives mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, it is possible to find numerous references of technologically-mediated ethical misconduct and trespass. These include examples of researchers and practitioners ethically stumbling in their handling of online settings/participants/practice, and the feelings of betrayal expressed by communities and individuals having discovered the presence of researchers in their midst (see King, 1996; Sharff, 1999; Eysenbach and Till, 2001; Thomas, 2004; see also White 2002b on participants in MOOs* attempting to regulate/ban research; Chen et al's 2005 examination of mailing list and newsgroup members opinions of researchers; and the hostility of ElseMOOers towards "drive by researchers" (Cherny, 1999)).

Such events demonstrate that the actions of researchers can themselves serve to destabilise (and in some cases lead to the destruction of) online communities. Like cautionary tales, references to such ethical failings and irresponsibility - such as the famous and oft-cited cases of deception and mismanagement in early "real world" social science research projects (for example, the 1950s study of "Springdale," and Lloyd Humphrey's 1970 study *Tearoom Trade*, see Berry, 2004) - serve to provoke conformity by establishing 'forbidden' (or, at the very least, frowned upon) acts.⁴⁸ These also serve to unify a group of researchers who should know better. It is perhaps no great surprise, in a research environment that increasingly seeks to involve the participants in research practice, that the misconduct in these tales frequently rests on issues relating to covert research (see Eichhorn, 2001). Such misconduct includes observation without notification or informed consent and the failure to then ensure anonymity, and deception by researchers withholding their true identity/purpose (see, for example, Thomas, 2004). As someone who is carrying out observation within public forums which is unannounced to the sites, the manner by which covert observation in online public spaces is criticised and defended is clearly of interest.

⁴⁸ See the wikipedia entry on cautionary tales; www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cautionary_tale.

There is a tradition of observational research in which “it has been accepted that behaviour that is performed within the public domain may be observed and researched without consent” (See Sixsmith and Murray, 2001). The preliminary report of the AOIR Ethics Committee presents a number of examples of ethically acceptable covert research, one of which is research in:

contexts such as chatrooms which are always open to anyone and thus are ‘public’ in a strong sense, and in which:

1. user names are already pseudonymous
2. in light of their option to always ‘go private’ if they wish

users thus choose to participate in the public areas of the chatroom and may thereby be understood to implicitly give consent to observation. (Ess, 2001, no page nos, his emphasis)

Underneath this example however, is the caveat: “It should be noted that not all committee members agree.”

The literature contains strong positions against covert work in favour of asking permission of sites and participants before studying them. The influence of the pro-informed consent position appears so influential that many researchers who have decided to carry out covert research ‘ethically’ (involving public settings and anonymised subjects, for example), and who still appear to believe this was the right approach, exhibit the need to strongly defend their choices (see Reid, 1996; Smith, 2004). In doing so, they appear to betray continuing sensitivity and unease about their choices and the impact of their research. In some cases this sensitivity seems to verge on guilt, as confessional narratives join the cautionary tales. Even those who discuss the public nature of particular settings provide mixed messages. Susan Barnes, for example, argues that certain settings are indeed public, but also that: “When researching any Internet group, it is a good idea to contact the group in advance and ask for permission to observe them” (Barnes, 2004, 219). Bakardjieva and Feenberg, who acknowledge the complex nature of the public/private distinction but also the public nature of certain environments, are firm in their criticism of covert observation:

Methodologically, the best way to collect data on group discussions would probably be not to reveal one’s presence and task to group members in order not to affect their behaviour and thus to be able to capture their naturally occurring discourse. This is technically feasible in the case of all online forums that are open to anyone to join. From an ethical perspective, however, if we had performed this kind of ‘naturalistic’ observation on unsuspecting subjects, we would have been little better than spies. (Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2001, 234)

Those who propose “an ethical stance” in this way, arguing that researchers should protect the innocence of those “unsuspecting subjects” who fail to recognise the public nature of the (in some ways) unregulated environments they inhabit, appear to configure

researchers as taking the responsibility of both nanny and moral guardian. However these participants are engaging with uncertain environments. Participants cannot be ‘known’; they may be social science researchers, but also market researchers and even, in some settings, bots. Indeed Turkle’s description of MUDs* as environments in which participants “struggle towards a new, still tentative discourse about the nature of community that is populated both by people and by programs that are social actors” (1997, 357), places an interesting spin on the debate over covert observation, by considering whether bots should disclose their artificiality to the group (364).

OBSERVATION IN PUBLIC? THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN TECHNICAL AND PERCEIVED OPENNESS

Traditionally, ‘public places’ refer to any regions in a community freely accessible to members of that community; ‘private places’ refer to soundproof regions where only members or invitees gather...” (Goffman, 1962, 9)

The distinction between technical and perceived openness is central to discussion of the practical decisions to be made when observing online activity (see McIntyre, 2003). This distinction can be illustrated in reference to Bakardjieva and Feenberg’s paper “Involving the Virtual Subject” (2001). In this work the authors contrast issues of ownership in public spaces online and off (using legislation and public policy in relation to photography and the rights of the individual to their image in public environments as the real world referent). They note that in contrast to photographing individuals in real world public settings:

In the case of the Internet, the subjects themselves construct the transcript of their own actions. The exploitation of that transcript requires no special technical intervention on the part of the exploiter. (Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2001, 239)

This contrast is founded on an emphasis of the technical requirements of the ‘exploitation’; whether it is an affordance of the environment or involves the intervention of an intermediary. This distinction appears to resonate with what Frankel and Siang’s term the “technological point of view”; the suggestion that technical accessibility equates with public-ness (Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2001, 232). Such an approach to defining the public/private distinction is evident in Christina Allen’s paper, “What’s wrong with the “golden rule”? Conundrums of Conducting Ethical Research in Cyberspace” (1996). Allen distinguishes public from private spaces within MOOs*, arguing that the former are open for study without the need for informed consent due to

the openness of access (Allen, 1996, see also Roberts et al, 2003). This form of public-ness is suggested in Goffman's definition of the public/private distinction in the quote introduced above.

The argument that technical openness is a marker of public-ness and that the setting - once so defined - can be studied without the need to acquire permission from its inhabitants, has been criticised as tactical, convenient and ethically flawed (see, for example, McIntyre, 2003; Bakardjieva and Feenberg's reference to spying also appears to support this). The 'convenience' of this technical approach has been challenged by reference to the *perceived* degree of openness, in terms that suggest that the researcher should defer to the ways that inhabitants understand these environments. Bakardjieva and Feenberg argue that:

the very fact that many members of online communities are only vaguely aware of the public nature of their exchanges suggests the need for caution. Their trust may be misplaced, but nevertheless it is not good for researchers to violate it without a compelling rationale. (Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2001, 239)

It is interesting that this assumption is founded upon the notion that even if the expectation of participants is misplaced it should be respected. This argument underpins their discussion of the ambiguous status of public forums, with what Storm King calls "perceived privacy" being at the root of this ambiguity (Bakardjieva and Feeberg, 2001, 234). Perceived privacy entails that some community members "do not expect to be research subjects" (Eysenbach and Till, 2001). In Goffman's terms, this suggests that "open, unwalled public places" may be (mis)regarded by members of Internet communities as "soundproof regions" (Goffman, 1962, 10).

It is worth considering how the technical/perceived public/private distinctions relate to my chosen sites. My discussion of the relative public/private-ness of COA and SHH in the previous section focused on *access* to the sites. This emphasised the technical openness of the settings. The stance I have taken can also be defended in relation to the perception of openness within these sites (although this move is not without its own problems). Clearly, for the 'covert' researcher, it is impossible to begin to gauge how participants perceive the nature of the setting other than by making reference to their postings. This approach has been proposed by Alison Cavanagh, who suggests that the researcher should examine how participants within it respond to two main issues; firstly how they react to lurkers (or perhaps in Bakardjieva and Feenberg's terms 'spies'), and

secondly how they express their understanding of the degree of openness of the space they are inhabiting (Cavanagh, 1999, no page nos). In a similar way, King proposes two general issues that should be considered in relation to sites in cyberspace in order to determine how results should be reported; the nature of accessibility to the site, and the perceived privacy of members (King, 1996). This involves looking to the setting to ascertain participants' stated understandings of the environment and its audience.

The posts on COA and SHH appear (linguistically) to make an appeal to a presumed but uncertain audience. This suggests an awareness of a public readership, indeed one which is necessary to the maintenance of activity within the sites:

□ Posted: Wed 23 Jun, 2004 1:56 am Post subject: Help?



Um... Its not help with the game that I need... I need help finding pictures from the Silent Hill series. Maria ones would be nice. I'm having a hard time finding anything for Maria at ALL. Its always the same pictures and the quality is never that good. *frowns* I want to make a batch of Silent Hill icons, ya see. I'd really appreciate it if you guys could gimme a hand here. *puppy dog eyes*
(*Silent Hill Heaven* post)

The difficulty here, is that the appeal to “you guys” might appear to suggest a presumed inclusion (and hence, exclusion); the imagined audience might not for example, include researchers (although as I noted in the previous section, researchers such as Hills have argued differently). The suggestion that “there is a tendency to assume that participants are similar to oneself” (Smith, 2004, 228), is evident in discourse on these sites, which often appears to involve an imagined “likeminded people” assumption. Yet alongside these, there are posts which demonstrate the impossibility of posters ‘seeing’ to whom they are posting (if anyone):

Anyone else still here?
Author:
Date: 01-23-05 20:23
i hope i am not alone.

(*City of Angel* post)

As well as via reference to perceptions of public-ness on COA and SHH, Bakardjieva and Feenberg's “little better than spies” quote can be challenged by reference to the practice of lurking.* Lurking is a ‘normal’ practice on COA and SHH, and work on other online communities suggests that the normalcy of this practice extends across

many different settings. Katherine Smith for example, makes reference to the acceptability of lurking in her research setting to support her decision not to inform the site of her research (Smith, 2004). The acceptability of lurking has been examined in relation to contexts of fan activity. Baym for example, suggests that in the Usenet group she studied “lurkers... are embraced as legitimized participants. The only people ostracized are those who attack the legitimacy of soap opera fandom” (Baym, cited in Hills, 2002, 172).

Baym’s *Tune In Log On* contains a section on the social practice of “unlurkings” within these environments (see Baym, 2000, 132), a practice that is referenced in other fan-centric texts (Macdonald, 1998, Gatson and Zweerink, 2004). Similar unlurkings are visible in my chosen research contexts where members introduce themselves to the sites:

Greetings and salutations. I've been *lurking* around as one known as a guest for *quite some time* and I finally decided to join up seeing as the other forum I frequent crashed. (SHH)

Just wanted to say hi. I've been *lurking* on this board *for awhile* so thought I'd finally join ya. 😊 (SHH)

Hi everyone I'm new here. I've been a SH fan ever since the 1 was released and have been *lurking* on these forums *for some time* and decided to sign up 😊 My fave SH is 2 and I plan on getting 4 when its released over here in the UK! 🇬🇧 (SHH) (*my emphasis*)

In these posts we see an emphasis on lurking as an acceptable stage of initial involvement, but it can also be a preference (Wohlblatt, 1996); there is no requirement that you have to post.

Arguments that configure lurking in public settings as spying are undermined by the fact that the ‘natural’ state of engagement in these settings is shared invisibility: unless you make an utterance (or in the case of SHH are logged on, which involves minimal visibility⁴⁹) you are not visible in the setting. Smith’s suggestion that:

While we seem willing to accept a researcher openly taking notes on interaction in a public park from a bench, we might have more concerns about them doing so while hidden in a bush (Smith, 2004, 230)

therefore appears misplaced, as in such sites, *everyone* is hidden. Observing without making one’s presence ‘known’ to the group might be problematic in terms of the data

⁴⁹ Registered members who are logged on are listed by name on the front page of the forums.

that can be collected from such involvement in a setting, but that would seem to depend on the research question and design, rather than any right or wrong.

4.4 TEXT OR SUBJECT?

In the final part of this chapter I want to turn to my use of data from COA and SHH. There are two broad approaches to the rights of use of online material (although there are clearly concerns about copyright issues to do with the use of images etc, I am referring here to work that considers the use of written posting activity). Firstly, there are perspectives that argue for the continued ownership of texts by their producers, thus pulling the participant into the frame of the research by seeking to reattach author to utterance (in terms of permission to quote etc). Secondly, there are perspectives that understand any material placed in public spaces as jettisoned from the offline self/author, and hence ‘up for grabs.’ These stances tie into formations of practical guidelines as to how data from such environments should be used, and offer interesting contrasts to work on the use of verbatim quotations in ‘real world’ research (see Corden and Sainsbury, 2005, 2006). The materiality of online research contexts, inhabited by absent bodies but often lasting utterances, appear to raise particular issues and difficulties.

The key issue here is whether textual material is regarded as bearing the subjectivity of a real author. Michele White’s discussion of “the ways that Internet material is made into people” (White, 2002a, 260), for instance, argues that in ethics writing such material has been “linked to guidelines for human subjects [as] representations get conflated with physical realities and people” (205). She suggests that:

Most of the ethical guidelines and concerns start with the presumption that Internet research involves human subjects and needs to follow current governmental guidelines. (251)

This conflation is seen in Amy Bruckman’s argument that the “real author” of “creative work” on the Internet needs to be verified (see White, 2002, 254), Annette Markham’s (2004) call to protect the unity of the subject, and Bakardjieva and Feenberg’s claim that a “‘non-alienation principle’ should be the basis of emergent social conventions in cyberspace” (2001, 233) - a principle by which participants should be granted the “right to control their own product” (2001, 236; see also Berry, 2004). Each involves the move to (re)establish the connection between avatar and (authoring) subject (see Jordan,

1999); tying into the AOIR's questioning of the distinction between subjects and authors (Ess, 2001). White (2002a) takes a strong position on such stances, suggesting they involve a confusion of representations for people.⁵⁰ Such positions are recruited by those who argue that property rights need to be established and secured in deference to an authorised voice (aka the offline subject); a position key to the discourse of informed consent.

My response to this absent-self issue is to focus attention on the research question. This echoes Markham's suggestion that although 'shoulds' are problematic in relation to Internet research: "It should always come back to the question" (AOIR conference notes, 2004). If the research is interested in the representations of the 'people' behind the text, then it makes sense to draw them into the frame. In contrast, work which engages with textual analysis of online interactions, and is not attempting to make claims about the on/offline relationship, does not need to go beyond the online content. Here we find the distinction between participant observation and document analysis (White, 2002b; Smith, 2004), and approval for covert research if human subjects are not included (Smith, 2004). The 'document analysis' approach to online material is seen in Bertha Chin and Jonathan Gray's description of their decision not to seek informed consent in their study of online pre-release discussion of the *Lord of the Rings* films:

We decided against contacting any of the active posters on the various message boards as we felt that their general reactions and discussions were enough for us to use as data. We realise that this may lay us open to charges of academic 'lurking' but must therefore stress that we were looking primarily at the text, and Tolkien fans' talk surrounding the text itself, not at how they use the Internet as a social apparatus [...] our aim is not to explain or theorise these viewers since it is not ethnography that we are concerned with, but an insight into how a pre-text takes form in the discussion of pre-viewers. (Chin and Gray, 2001, no page nos.)

Taken to the extreme it is the essentialised subject, constructed from the multiplicity of posts, that can be betrayed by the researcher; the individual utterances have no feelings to hurt.

The equating of text and subject is also visible in arguments over the use of data from such settings. The use (and manipulation) of direct quotations has, for example, been criticised in terms that appear to mythologize online postings. Markham suggests that the editing choices of the researcher when making use of online posts in research can potentially reconfigure the "person's very being," placing its utterances "into a context

⁵⁰ See her alternative discussion of avatars as art objects, rather than people in White, 2002.

of a research account rather than left in the context of experience” (Markham, 2004, no page nos.). The recontextualisation of utterances is here presented as being potentially damaging to the (real) subject. Markham notes that this is not unique to CMC research but argues that

computer-mediated environments seem to highlight this dilemma of research reporting because it’s so clear that text can be the primary, if not sole means of producing and negotiating self, other, body, and culture” (ibid).

The idea that the researcher can damage the “very being” of online participants, appears to equate the online “body of work” with the identity of an essentialised authoring subject. This perspective is supported by Sharon Boehlefeld’s advice to researchers to ask permission of posters before reproducing long extracts of quotes (Boehlefeld, 1996).

The central concerns here - “To whom do the posts belong?” (Sixsmith and Murray, 2001), and what do they represent? - raise questions of ownership and authorship. Again, it is worth considering these positions in relation to the context of COA and SHH. It is true that by cutting and pasting a quote into a ‘scholarly’ article or thesis the researcher displaces that utterance into a different genre, with a different audience, and makes it part of a different game. In this way, the use of quotations from online settings and the analysis of posted messages can be seen as constituting a radical intervention (see Walther, 2002, 206). The process by which the quotes are transformed into data may reflect ethical standpoints and concerns (both personal and professional) that can differ from the codes of netiquette that the posters in these cultures might have worked to establish. As public websites, however, both COA and SHH are open to the acts of displacement and recontextualisation that cmc enables via features such as the cut-and-paste function. Like many websites, posters on COA and SHH frequently appropriate and cross-reference messages and settings by posting links to external sites and quoting from each other. Herring (2001) suggests that copying extracts of previous messages in such environments serves to “create the illusion of adjacency”; they certainly serve to demonstrate the “instability” of texts and authorship online (Kress, 2003). More generally in Internet settings, we find texts constantly being displaced and pulled across into spaces other than that in which they were originally created and posted (for example, information taken from news sites posted on spoiler forums of fan sites) and it is often up to the poster to specify the rules regarding re-posting (as many fan fiction writers already do).

The normalcy of such literal re-contextualisations on COA and SHH, suggests that the recruitment of such data in academic work may be less problematic than those who regard such moves as acts of betrayal suggest. There is an awareness that postings are up for grabs once posted, and that their final destination (and the form in which they will be presented/recruited) cannot be controlled. At the same time, the fact that usernames are often attached in order to establish and maintain original reference points (and here I am referring particularly to COA and SHH) serves to support my decision, discussed earlier, to use original avatar names in this study. Whilst I am not seeking to re-attach author to utterance, it is still possible to defend this stance in relation to protection of authorship in this way, as one citing an author, or artist, would do.

4.5 CONCLUSION

In considering the move from generalised ethical rules to localised perspectives, I have attempted to undermine the notion of ‘an’ ethical approach to research in favour of the establishing of an informed ethical stance. Although this might seem to be a straightforward move, the increasing bureaucratisation of ethical practice, in which moves are made to define general rules in other fields of social research practice, suggests that the importance of localised perspectives needs to be emphasised, and not just in relation to online research. The worry is, as Jim Thomas states, that:

ethical precepts, while a cornerstone of research, risk being reified by moral entrepreneurs who advocate drafting explicit and immutable prescriptions and proscriptions for Net research. (Thomas, 2004, 187).

This is clearly worth considering in relation to offline as well as online research.

The discussion of my handling of my relationship to, and use of data from, COA and SHH demonstrates the need to re-define and re-establish such ethical positions in response to the changing nature of online environments, particularly in the face of unexpected events. As in offline research, the efforts required in maintaining an ethical stance throughout the timeframe of a research project should not be underestimated. One event which I have not mentioned in this chapter led me to contact one of the ‘real’ people behind the public face of SHH (albeit in a still technologically-mediated manner). When SHH was hacked in 2005, the forums were deleted, and the site lost its posting history (this event is discussed further in Chapter 6). At this point I decided to

contact one of the owners of the site (Vixx) by personal email to inform her of my research and the fact that I had an archive of the site, offering to provide her with a copy.⁵¹ This marked a break with my non-intervention with the site, and was a decision based on my responsibility not just to other professional researchers, but to the fan interests of the two settings. Vixx's positive response to news of my research, and her stated interest in reading the resulting work, was reassuring in some ways (I had, I admit, been somewhat nervous about what her reaction would be). This reassurance was short lived; Vixx did not respond to my second email in which I requested her address so that I could send her a copy of the archive. This left me uncertain as to whether her non-reply was a result of the site simply having moved on - activity on the forums was building up again and the loss was perhaps less keenly felt - or perhaps due to the fact that she did not want to provide me with her physical address. It may, however, have been due to the fact that in my email, having been asked by Vixx what my username was so that she might perhaps look out for me online, I had revealed that I had not been posting on the site. This - despite the general legitimacy of lurking - may perhaps have undermined (for Vixx) my status as an authentic presence on the site.

I have suggested that the public domain status of COA and SHH - which I have defined (and defended) in terms of both technical and perceived public-ness - is of particular significance to the choices I have made. This is particularly the case in relation to my decision to carry out covert observation in these settings. In making an utterance in these contexts, members are unable to control their audience, and this is referenced in these settings in terms of addresses to an unseen audience (as well as references to lurking, as discussed). Any assumption that the audience can be determined would be misguided, misreading a public setting as a private one. The final destination of an utterance posted in such contexts cannot be constrained, and neither can its audience. Anyone posting to a forum like COA and SHH must be aware that anyone can read their post; an idea that the more private areas of these sites serve to reinforce. As Nancy Baym has suggested, our responsibility as researchers might be to educate rather than to protect, for posters to these sites are potentially under the gaze of other agents such as

⁵¹ The 'total' archive of SHH that I generated using Offline Explorer Pro (discussed in Chapter 3) referred only to the pre-hack SHH.

marketing companies whose interests are perhaps more problematic than those of researchers (AOIR conference notes, 2004).

By presenting judgements about the use of online broadcasts in research writing in moral terms - in terms of 'not being ethical' - some researchers appear to base their judgements either in terms of some natural law about the proper rights of the individual, in terms of a notion of property rights which one might think are in effect given up at the moment of delivery to the public space, or in terms of risk, which is in the same way part of the making public of an utterance. These concerns need to be granted consideration, but should not prohibit consideration of covert practices in public environments.

CHAPTER 5: THE RECRUITMENT OF KEY CONCEPTS IN THE ANALYSIS OF COA AND SHH

5.1. INTRODUCTION

Each of the analysis chapters which follow this chapter asks different questions of the posting activity on COA and SHH. Together, the chapters provide different perspectives on these settings, moving between different levels of analysis in the consideration of how the members of the sites talk about the fan ‘communities,’ the fan objects, each other, and themselves, and of how this discussion is institutionalised within these settings.

In broad terms, all four analysis chapters are influenced by a general theoretical approach: *Social Activity Theory* (Dowling, 1998, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, in press). This language of description conceptualises social activity in terms of alliances and oppositions. It then seeks to explore the textual strategies by which these alliances and oppositions are established, maintained, and destabilised. In configuring sociocultural practices in these terms, Social Activity Theory foregrounds “the ongoing process of construction of any social formation, rather than viewing social objects as stable or fixed entities” (Lapping and Pelletier, 2006, 7). The modes of authority action schema referenced in Chapter 3 for example – which will be presented in detail in Chapter 8 – provides a language for constructing a description of the struggle to establish different authority claims within the posting activity on COA and SHH.

Working within this general framework, I have recruited a number of key concepts in my analysis of the activity on these sites. These concepts - community, identity, and pedagogy - are to some extent intertwined in the analysis. In this chapter it is my intention to position my use of these three concepts - each of which bears heavy theoretical and rhetorical baggage - in relation to existing theoretical antecedents. At the same time I will identify the ways in which these concepts have been used in the empirical work relating to fans and cmc discussed in Chapter 2, in order to position the ways in which my own analysis builds upon - and moves beyond - this work. In each section this involves tracking a movement from essentialised and humanistic conceptions of social relations and practice, towards a focus on strategic, de-

essentialised, and relational moves. In my discussion of community and identity, my starting point is the expression of concerns relating to the nature and impact of technologically mediated communication on the Internet.

5.2 COMMUNITY

The concept of ‘community’ has long failed “to secure a common ground” (Ahmed and Fortier, 2003). In the entry for community in Raymond Williams’ *Keywords*, Williams suggests that the complexity of the term:

relates to the difficult interaction [between] on the one hand the sense of direct common concern; on the other hand the materialization of various forms of common organization, which may or may not adequately express this (Williams, 1983, 76).

The debate surrounding this concept has been fuelled and reinvigorated by the deterritorialising challenges of globalisation, and the emergence of technologically mediated and sustained cultures (see Hampton and Wellman, 2003). The tension Williams suggests between an idea of commonality and the materialisation of actual organisations continues to run through opposing uses of the concept in this literature.

As I move towards presenting the way in which I am defining community, I will first briefly explore the use of the term in the work on media fans and online communities introduced in Chapter 2. I will then examine two models - Lave and Wenger’s *communities of practice* (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998a, 1998b) and James Gee’s model of the *affinity space* (Gee 2004, 2005). These provide different approaches to the consideration of teaching and learning within social settings that are of particular interest because of their established (in the case of the communities of practice) or growing (in relation to affinity spaces) influence on research. Each has been recruited in the analysis of the sorts of informal, mediated contexts that I am exploring. I will close this section by outlining the way in which I am using the concept of community in my analysis of COA and SHH.

HUMANISTIC APPROACHES TO THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY IN INTERNET AND FAN STUDIES RESEARCH

The complexity of the concept of community can be illustrated through reference to the literature on online activity. Defining the nature (and feasibility) of community online has been the project of a large number of researchers (e.g. Baym, 1995, 1998; Jones, 1995, 1999, 2002; Wellman and Gulia, 1996; Ito, 1997; Fernback, 1999; Gotved, 2002; Mitra, 2000, 2003; Blanchard, 2004; Feenberg and Bakardjicva, 2004). Within this work, the appropriateness of the use of the term in relation to online environments has proved a point of contention, inspiring radically different opinions founded on varying ways of understanding the unfettering from the physical world within technologically mediated environments.

Joyce Nip has suggested that anxieties about the loss of community resulting from the development of cmc, represent a resurfacing of fears last seen in responses to the Industrial Revolution (Nip, 2004, 409). These fears are visible in concerns about the impact of online community on off-line engagement in terms of the destruction of moral frameworks (see Baym, 1998), and fears about the fragmentation of ‘real’ communities (Sassi, 1996). They are also evident in popular stereotypes of Internet users as socially isolated individuals engaging only in impoverished online settings. This perspective has been emulated in work on distance education. Lancaster and Nickel (2001) note how:

Critics of distance education often emphasize that students who do not visit the physical campus are denied the ancillary elements that have traditionally defined the college experience and are therefore isolated. The assumption is that community can only exist in one kind of space: the physical campus. (Lancaster and Nickel, 2001, no page nos)

Whilst Anderson’s work on “imagined communities” (1991) has been used to argue that “Some sort of virtuality is a normal aspect of community life, regardless of the nature of the medium upon which it relies” (Feenberg and Bakardjicva, 2004, 37), the criticisms of distance education described by Lancaster and Nickel appear to be established from a humanistic perspective which ties authentic forms of community to the connection between ‘real’ subjects.

Alongside fears relating to the Internet, we find the celebration of possibilities for social interaction in electronically mediated environments; the “promise of a renewed sense of community and, in many instances, new types and formations of community” (Jones,

2002, 2). In Chapter 2, I made reference to Rheingold's early and influential study of The WELL*, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1993).

Here, virtual communities were defined as:

social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. (Rheingold, 1993, 5)

Rheingold proposed that 'real' connections could be established and maintained online; this despite the fact that he emphasised the importance of face-to-face meetings in the production of 'authentic community' (ibid, 2). This work provided not only an influential frontier metaphor, but also the early basis for rhetoric which "has constructed online community in terms of a 'global village,' valorising the freeing of social interaction from geography" (Goodfellow, 2005, 114). As with more pessimistic claims about the nature of online community, this rhetoric has imbued strands of educational research, particularly that relating to online learning;

According to this view, online interaction is characterised by the elimination of personal inequalities, free speech and the transcending of culturally specific values that hinder communication, free exchange and shared understanding (Goodfellow, 2005, 114)

Within both of these broad positive and negative approaches to online community, we find continuing efforts to define the "benchmarks of community in the physical world" and consider whether (and if so, how) they might be replicated "in online social formations" (Mitra, 1999, no page nos.). The interest in the principles by which community might be recognised takes a methodological slant in moves to define markers of 'community' within, for example, Susan Herring's work on Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis which suggests that community can be identified via references to forms of practice – including reciprocity, references to group, solidarity, and norms (Herring, nd).

Concerns about the viability of community in deterritorialised, body-free, and technologically mediated spaces have been less visible in work on media fans, where the idea of fan communities sustained over geographic boundaries has been accepted since the 1980s. Bacon-Smith's description of science fiction fan culture in *Enterprising Women* (1992), for example, describes how:

Unlike more traditional, geographically fixed, communities, including clubs, the fan world structures itself around a series of conventions, held in a 'mobile geography' of hotels all over the world. Conventions spatially and temporally organize the interaction between the community and potential new members, and serve as formal meeting places for the various smaller groups of fans who follow a convention circuit. (Bacon-Smith, 1992, 9)

Beyond these meetings, Bacon-Smith presents an image of fan community as established and maintained across geographical boundaries and mediated by technology (the use of photocopiers for zine production, and the use of the postal system to connect members etc.). The similarity between fandom and (online) communities has been argued by a number of different fan researchers (Jenkins, 2002; Merrick, 2004). In this work we also find a humanistic celebration of human collectivity and agency. Gatson and Zweerink, for example, note that for participants within their research site *The Bronze*, the Internet served as “a new tool to do what is arguably the most basic human work, building community” (2004a, 25). The danger with such statements is that fan communities are presented as utopian, although - as I described in Chapter 2 - this has been challenged by an increasing interest in the formation of hierarchy and internal conflict within fandoms.

One of the reasons that communities of fans can be identified across space is their interest in a shared object. A recurring issue relating to online interest groups however, is whether common interest equates to community. In an assault on the idea of virtual community in the magazine *Internet World*, Joel Snyder suggests:

A community is more than a bunch of people distributed in all 24 time zones, sitting in their dens and pounding away on keyboards about the latest news in alt.music.indigo-girls. That's not a community; it's a fan club. Newsgroups, mailing lists, chat rooms--call them what you will--the Internet's virtual communities are not communities in almost any sense of the word. A community is people who have greater things in common than a fascination with a narrowly defined topic. (Snyder, 1996, no page nos.)

Shawn Wilbur has explored such ideas, introducing a marketing device for Harlequin Enterprises* as an empirical case. This device involved a telephone number which enabled fans of Tyler* romantic fiction to “listen to the voices of various characters as they told you the daily town gossip, gave you previews of forthcoming novels, or shared recipes” (Wilbur, 2000, 52). Wilbur asks whether callers to this voicemail can be conceived as taking part within a community, suggesting that:

By Rheingold's definition we would have to say no, I think. The requirement of explicit person-to-person communication means that no matter how many individuals shared the experience of the virtual Tyler, they did not constitute a community [...] (Wilbur, 2000, 52)

He goes on to add that it is perhaps better to make reference to “cultures of compatible or shared consumption” (52) rather than communities, suggesting that the propensity for flaming* within online environments is due to the fact that members of such collectives

privilege their interest in the subject matter, rather than their relationship to other members of these sites (53).

Such arguments raise interesting questions, focusing attention both on the ways that relationships between members of online environments are configured, as well as the connections between the members and subject matter of these sites. I am now going to consider two models which represent different conceptual frameworks that might be recruited in response to such issues; each however raises new questions.

COMMUNITY AS 'PRACTICE'

Two of the early fan texts introduced in Chapter 2, Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* and Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*, document the practices of media fans around shared interests. Each study describes the development of a specialist language, the regulation of practices, the production of creative work and socially situated readings of texts. The career of new participants towards central membership is discussed in terms of the process of apprenticeship by which newbies, including researchers (Bacon-Smith, 1992), are integrated into fan communities. Bacon-Smith, for example, describes how after 5 years of research she "tested the extent" to which she had understood what she had "seen and heard" (1992, 301) by anonymously submitting fan fiction stories. From the responses of community members and editors she learnt "how poorly I had internalized the aesthetics of the group" (1992, 301). The emphasis within this work on apprenticeship and informally acquired understanding of "how to speak" within given cultural contexts - both through participation and via the guidance of more experienced members - demonstrates some of the key elements of Lave and Wenger's influential conceptualisation of social activity in terms of "communities of practice."

In *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Lave and Wenger (1991) describe a model of situated learning within communities of practice. These communities are established through cycles of social reproduction by which newcomers move via what Lave and Wenger term "legitimate peripheral participation" towards full membership. These cycles leave a "historical trace of artefacts – physical, linguistic and symbolic and of social structures, which constitute and reconstitute the practice over time" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, 58). Within this model, as will be discussed in the

final section of this chapter,⁵² learning is part of the process by which the new member both learns to speak and establishes their identity as participant within the setting (43). The generation of community, learning and the production of identity through practice are thus intertwined. By defining community in terms of “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (98), Lave and Wenger move away from romantic notions of collective communal identity. Instead they focus their attention on the regularity of practice as constituted within social contexts. This move has been continued within recent studies of media fandom within online contexts (see Baym, 2000; Prandstaller, 2003).

Wenger suggests that the community of practice can be distinguished from communities of interest or geographical communities as these do not imply “a shared practice” (Wenger, 1998b, no page nos.); although clearly there must be shared practices at some level of analysis. He also differentiates them from other forms of organisation such as networks, suggesting that unlike such structures, communities of practice are “about something” (ibid). In this way the community of practice is both similar and different from activities surrounding a shared object which Wilbur saw as problematic in relation to the establishment of community; what is shared is specified as practice rather than merely an object of interest.

FROM ‘PRACTICE’ TO ‘SPACE’

In *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling*⁵³ (2004), Gee presents a model of activity rooted in a conceptualisation of socially situated learning similar to that of Lave and Wenger. Gee however, makes use of a different metaphor – proposing that we consider sites of activity as *spaces* rather than communities of practice. One of his central criticisms of the community of practice model is what he

⁵² Lave and Wenger’s development of the concept of *situated learning* will be discussed in relation to models of pedagogic activity in section 5.4

⁵³ Gee presents the same concept (and much of the same discussion) in a later collection of papers *Beyond Communities of Practice* (Barton and Tusting, 2005) which sought to examine and “go beyond” the concept of community of practice. Here he adds the concept of “social semiotic spaces.” In each case, Gee only cites the specifically management related work of Wenger, rather than Wenger’s earlier anthropologically informed work with Jean Lave.

perceives as the difficulty of defining membership to specific communities. Gee argues that:

If we start with the notion of a ‘community’ we can’t go any further until we have defined who is in and who is not, since otherwise we can’t identify the community (ibid, 78).

and goes on to suggest that:

If we start by talking about spaces rather than ‘communities,’ we can then go on and ask to what extent the people interacting within a space, or some subgroup of them, do or do not actually form a community. (ibid)

Here, in contrast with Lave and Wenger’s focus on the *realisation* of practices, Gee’s concern is with principles of *recognition* (Dowling, 1998); prioritising “issues of participation, membership, and boundaries” (Gee, 2004, 78) by first delineating a space and then examining the practice within it. Gee leaves an important question unanswered, however, by failing to define what a community ‘is’ in his terms. This is particularly problematic when he makes reference to community in a “real sense” (78). The model of the *space* he proposes involves three elements: content (something that the space is about), the generator(s) (which provide content) and portals (which provide access to the space).⁵⁴ Examples illustrating these include classrooms (where the textbook, teacher and materials may serve as generators, and small group sessions and lab work are provided as examples of portals), and the strategy computer game, *Age of Mythology* (portals being the game disk, and related websites). Each space is presented as having a “content organization” and “interactional organization” - Gee suggests that analyses of such spaces can concentrate on either.

Gee then goes on to present one specific type of space – the *affinity space* - which he argues is of particular importance for education, as:

many young people today have lots of experience with affinity spaces, and thus have the opportunity to compare and contrast their experiences with these to their experiences in classroom (83)

In introducing the affinity space, Gee again makes reference to the game *Age of Mythology*, but also to its fan website *AoM Heaven*. Eleven features of the affinity space are presented, including features relating to inhabitation and membership (e.g. “Newbies and masters and everyone else share common space” (87)), the encouragement of different forms of knowledge (which I will discuss later in more detail), and the suggestion of a plurality of “forms and routes” to both participation and

⁵⁴ Generators can also serve as portals.

status involving “porous leadership” and leaders who “don’t and can’t order people around or create rigid, unchanging, and impregnable hierarchies” (87).

The concept of the affinity space has been adopted by academics interested in fan activities and gaming (e.g. Squire and Steinkuehler, 2005), the study of social forms of learning within new types of online community such as the digital photography sharing site Flickr⁵⁵ (Davies, 2006), and work more broadly on what has become known as ‘convergence culture’ (see Jenkins, 2006). The model provides a checklist for qualities that could be applied in relation to COA and SHH in order to gauge the extent to which they are affinity spaces. Beyond this, however, the model does little analytical work and Gee’s argument can be challenged in relation to a number of issues.

Firstly, Gee’s anxiety about the problem of identifying who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ is explicitly addressed by Lave and Wenger, who argue that:

It is possible to delineate the community that is the site of a learning process by analyzing the reproduction cycles of the communities that seem to be involved and their relations (1991, 98).

The community is thus identified from the exploration of the regularity of practices within a given context. Unlike Lave and Wenger’s work, Gee presents no consideration of the fluidity of these spaces; the ways in which practices might develop/change. The presentation of the affinity space is also somewhat confusing as a result of shifting levels of analysis in its presentation (moves, for example, between gaming and specific games). A more significant criticism, perhaps, is the fact that whilst Gee makes reference to the types of productivity and knowledge within affinity spaces, the analysis never goes beyond this. The specificity of the practice is not explored but reduced to a summary checklist of activities and generalised claims regarding types of behaviour within such spaces. Because of this, the description remains at a relatively abstract level. Whilst Gee makes a number of claims about the nature of authority and learning within such spaces, micro-level analysis would appear valuable to support these statements; to a limited extent this work has begun to be done by others using these terms (see Davies, 2006).

⁵⁵ www.Flickr.com

One key question that must be asked of this model relates to the use of the term ‘affinity.’ In Gee’s model this appears to function like a motor beneath the surface of the individual’s engagement with the space, suggesting a motivating interest, the idea:

that what people have an affinity with (or for) in an affinity space is not first and foremost the other people using the space, but the endeavour or interest around which the space is organized (Gee, 2004, 84)

Yet the focus in Gee’s discussion is on the broadly pedagogic productivity of these spaces, primarily discussed in terms of the various forms of ‘knowledge’ that the space encourages and generates. Here, Matt Hills’ suggestion that Jenkins’ work on fans betrays an “informational bias” by conceptualising information technologies as “primarily a technology of information flow” (Hills, 2001, 156), becomes relevant. Hills suggests that such bias “replicates an emphasis on the rational and cognitive processes of fan ‘mastery’ (Jenkins, 1995),” neglecting “the affective dimensions and intensifications which can accompany this process” (Hills, 2001, 156).

This distinction between the rational and affective dimensions of fan activity is an important one, and will be discussed further in the next section in relation to the conceptualisation of fan identity. However, it is worth introducing at this point, as it serves to demonstrate what Gee’s description of the affinity space does not provide. Citing Will Brooker’s suggestion that “fandom is built around love” (Brooker, cited in Hills, 2001, 149), Hills states that:

the question I want to explore [...] is how this ‘love’ is channelled, reinforced and reconstituted by the availability of ongoing fan speculation and interpretation when ‘the textual archives of... *The X-Files* are augmented almost every week with a new and instantly canonical episode’ which can be explored and negotiated by on-line fans” (Hills, 2001, 149)

The same question can be posed to Gee, whose model offers little idea of how affinity is “challenged, reinforced and reconstituted” within affinity spaces. In seeking to go beyond the description of productivity within such spaces, one might ask how affinity becomes manifest, realised within interactions, and - of particular interest, perhaps - how/the extent to which it can be challenged. This latter issue will be examined in Chapter 7.

COMMUNITY STRATEGIES ON COA AND SHH

In exploring the activity within COA and SHH, my own interest is broadly in how alliances are marked out within posting activity through the use of appeals to common

reference points, and how these are recruited, challenged and re-affirmed at points of upheaval and conflict. This involves a break with humanistic models, by examining the recruitment of shared references which provide unifying (and potentially excluding) resources, by making strategic appeals to a 'we-ness' within interactions. The endeavour is thus not the search for essential features of what makes COA and SHH 'communities,' or establishing whether they are indeed 'authentic' communities. My approach to COA and SHH therefore follows Lave and Wenger's work, in terms of marking out a site and then exploring the moves within it. However I am also interested in the ways that relationships to other sites of activity are established.

In broad terms my use of the idea of community resonates with the examination of the political uses of this term. In a special edition of the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* titled "Re-Imagining Communities," for example, the editors note how multiple appeals to community are "deeply implicated in political projects" (Ahmed and Fortier, 2003, 252). They make reference to George Bush's statement "you are either with us or against us," describing it as:

an appeal to community that resonates strongly at the international level. In this narrative, those who are not "with us" are automatically constructed as against us, whereby "againstness" is aligned with a form of terror or terrorism [...] We must ask, what does it mean to "be with" [...] (Ahmed and Fortier, 2003, 252)

Within the literature on virtual community introduced above, we find similar use of this term as a strategic resource in the construction of definitions of the Internet as either capable of supporting social and cultural life or not.

One recent example of this way of using the concept of community to examine the workings of empirical settings is found in Dowling's and Brown's work on "community strategies" in South African schools (2006). Appeals to community referents within school activities are examined at both individual and collective levels. These include references to "virtual" communities (which do not "define a coherent space for communicative action" (Dowling and Brown, 2006, 9)) and substantive communities (which have definite locations) (10). Here we see appeals to common resources - which Dowling and Brown term "affiliation strategies" - to referents both outside the schools and within teacher/student relationships. These work to establish shared reference points, and hence a sameness. Alongside these, use of community strategies (22) are identified in banter, smiling, using the term 'we'; all of which work to constitute

togetherness. The sorts of questions that Dowling and Brown ask are productive in relation of COA and SHH. What referents are recruited in order to establish commonality between members, for example, and how are these involved in the inclusion/exclusion of members?

This approach can be contrasted to psychological approaches to “sense of community” (McMillan and Chavis, 1986), which have been taken in the study of virtual communities (Blanchard and Marcus, 2004, Blanchard, 2004). Rather than psychologising the connections that posters may *feel* towards each other (as this entails an essentialised conceptualisation of agents within the sites), it is my intention to examine the strategies by which the connectivity and alliances within these sites are marked out and negotiated. This involves examining how the idea of these sites as communities is performed within these settings, both explicitly through discussion of the sites as ‘communities’ and at the level of interactions.

5.3 IDENTITY

My use of this second term is informed by two established theoretical movements away from essentialised conceptions of identity. The first involves approaches to identity which emphasise the strategic construction of cultural identity. This stems specifically from the work of Pierre Bourdieu; work which has had particular influence on fan studies research (see Hills, 2002; Sandvoss, 2005; and Williamson, 2005). The second involves varying conceptualisations of identity as multiple, performed, and context-dependent. Here I will draw from approaches to the fixing of meaning in language. Before examining these influences I will return briefly to the ideas relating to identity online, which have generated humanistic concerns similar to those expressed in relation to the idea of ‘virtual community.’

ESSENTIALISING IDENTITY

Like the use of community, the concept of identity involves claims about commonality. Rather than common features or connections between individuals, however, this commonality relates to the unification of the self. For some, such unification appears challenged by the move into online environments. In certain online environments, for example:

the 'look' of any particular user can be altered fairly easily and names are generally changeable. This means then that a solid consistency of identity and body is not a given in any environment. (Taylor, 1999, no page nos.)⁵⁶

The repercussions of interacting within such environments has been explored in some of the key literature on identity in relation to online environments (Reid, 1994; Donath, 1999, 2001; Turkle, 1995, 1996, 1997; Taylor, 1999; Webb, 2001). This literature has responded to the hopes and fears surrounding identity in cmc environments. If the ideal for online community involves a promise of social interaction across geographic boundaries, the promise of online identity is related the escape from the body in the shift from "embodied, biographical identities" (Denzin, 1999, 108) to mediated textual representations. Each ties into readings of the democratic potential of cmc, via mediated communication. At the same time, fears have emerged; particularly about the possibilities for identity deception online (as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4). As in the exploration of online community, such fears relate to absence of an authenticating 'real.' Judith Donath has described how the 'real' body appears to provide "a compelling and convenient definition of identity," a stabilising anchor (Donath, 1999, 29). The loss of this anchor – which appears to relate to an essentialised 'true' identity – has inspired anxiety.

These fears, like those relating to the loss of authentic community in cmc environments, emerge from a humanist privileging of the self. These approaches use markers such as 'the real body' to identify such selfhood, and thus constitute a conception of identity as unified, stable and coherent. This influence can be related back to the fan research that I discussed in Chapter 3 which prioritises the knowing fan subject. In contrast, in this study I am seeking to go beyond such essentialising moves altogether. I now turn to outlining two key influences on the way I am doing this, starting with consideration of the strategic formation of what it is to 'be a fan' in fan studies literature.

CULTURAL DISTINCTION AND THE STRATEGIC FORMATION OF IDENTITY

The taking on and expression of a fan identity has long been regarded as problematic. Prior to the audience and fan studies research that served to demonstrate the 'critical' faculties of media consumers, the dominant model of fans (particularly in the popular

⁵⁶ Here Taylor is describing her own research setting, an MMOPG.*

press) was expressed in terms of a “pathology model” (Jensen, 1992), with the demeaning of female fandom particularly commonplace (Bury, 1998). As I discussed in Chapter 2, this denigration of fans has been challenged via the exploration of the creative and skilful productivity of fan cultures. In the process ‘being a fan’ has frequently been configured in terms of difference from the practices of other consumers.

Bourdieu’s work on taste and cultural distinction provides a conceptual language that has been particularly influential here in developing the consideration of strategic configurations of identity. His work on position-taking by art producers in what he terms “fields of cultural production” has, for example, been recruited in consideration of fan productivity (Bacon-Smith, 2002). Sandvoss suggests two reasons why this is particularly important: firstly because Bourdieu’s work “accounts for the multiple factors through which identity and class position are defined in modern societies” (2005, 33), and secondly because, within his work, class positions:

are articulated through consumption preferences that also constitute the very basis of fandom: the principle of taste as the privileging of defined, distinct objects of consumption. (ibid, 34).

The marking out of distinction and difference in terms of taste has been a key element of the study of fan identities within fan contexts. One of the key ways in which Bourdieu’s work has been used is in examining the formation of hierarchies within “subcultural” contexts (ibid, 35).

A key work here is Sarah Thornton’s study *Club Cultures* (1995), which extends Bourdieu’s forms of capital by introducing the idea of “subcultural capital.” Thornton examines the “complex stratifications and mobilities of contemporary youth culture” involved in the construction of clubbers’ (subcultural) identity (Thornton, 1995, 92). She notes the importance of the marking out of taste in the configuration of the clubber’s sense of self (164). Thornton makes an important move by tying this into examination of high/low culture distinctions *within* the popular field (rather than between popular and “high” culture). She proposes the idea of “subcultural ideologies” the:

means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups, assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass. In this way, I am not simply researching the beliefs of a cluster of communities, but investigating the way that they make ‘meaning in the service of power’ – however modest these powers may be (Thompson, 2000: 7). Distinctions are never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of *others*. (Thornton, 1995, 10)

By equating assertions of difference with assertions of inferiority in this work, Thornton ignores the positive identification with the other – something that I will propose is central to the construction of fan hierarchy in Chapter 8.

The interest in the marking of distinction within the popular field has been continued by others, for example Roberta Pearson's (2003) discussion of the difference between cult television and cult film fans, and Mark Jancovich's *Distinction*-inspired examination of the ways in which fan authorship within cult film fandom works to construct identity both within fan communities, and between fan cultures and the interests of other groups "through the construction of an inauthentic Other" (Jancovich, 2002, 306). Jancovich criticises the stable oppositional model of the relationship between cult film and mainstream forces suggested by writers such as Jeffrey Sconce. He suggests that rather than being stable "taste cultures," cult movie audiences act strategically, demonstrating

a series of frequently apposed and contradictory reading strategies that are defined through a sense of their difference to an equally incoherently imagined 'normality'" (Jancovich, 2002, 315).

Here, then, fans are presented as setting themselves in opposition to a negotiated other which is recruited in order to define the nature of fan activity. Jancovich offers an example of how fans of the *X-Files* (who perceived themselves as cult fans) transferred their allegiance to other texts when the series became popular. Jancovich had described similar oppositional positioning in an earlier paper on the struggles over authenticity and genre in horror film fandom, noting how fans identify certain films as 'real' and 'authentic,' "Specifically to define their own opposition to, or distinction from, what they define as inauthentic commercial products of mainstream culture" (Jancovich, 2000, 25). Here, he echoes Thornton's words above, suggesting that "Differences in taste are never neutral but are always a distaste, a rejection of the tastes of others" (33). This idea of distaste as involved in the establishment of affiliation will be considered and challenged in my consideration of the voicing of earnest, and positive modes of fandom in Chapter 9.

Two main distinctions have been identified within fan studies work as central to the oppositional construction of fan identity. The first relates to the marking of difference between fans and consumers, and the second to the distinction between what can be considered as *sentimental* versus *intellectual* forms of engagement with texts. Both of

these distinctions have been explored by Matt Hills. In *Fan Cultures*, for example, Hills moves from a consideration of the relationship between the subculture and mainstream to discussing how:

The imagined subjectivity of the 'consumer' is also hugely important to fans as they strive to mark out the distinctiveness of fan knowledge and fan activities. (Hills, 2002, 27)

He describes how “‘good’ fan identities are constructed against a further imagined Other; the ‘bad’ consumer” (Hills, 2002, 27), noting “the potentially curious co-existence within fan cultures of both anti-commercial ideologies and commodity-completist practices” (Hills, 2002, 28) and fans’ implication in the economic and cultural processes they often appear to “resist” (Hills, 2002, 29). Hills suggests that

Conventional logic, seeking to construct a sustainable opposition between the ‘fan’ and the ‘consumer,’ falsifies the fan’s experience by positioning fan and consumer as separable cultural identities. (29)

Hills himself seeks a “theoretical approach to fandom that can *tolerate* contradiction without seeking to close it down prematurely.” (29, his emphasis) The conventional logic to which Hills is here referring is the sort of continuum of practice presented by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) which represents a hierarchising of activity with the consumer, for example, opposed to the “petty producer” (Hills, 2002, 29). Hills also criticises the way that, in *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins “revalues the fan’s intense consumption by allying this with the cultural values of production: they are ‘consumers who also produce’” (30).

Hills addresses the second distinction between sentimental and intellectual engagement in *Pleasures of Horror* (2005), a study of the performance of pleasures of the genre in various forms (including fan talk, theorising etc). Presenting an analysis of Mark Kermode’s (1997) essay on being a horror film fan, “I was a teenage horror fan: or, ‘How I learned to stop worrying and love Linda Blair,’” Hills discusses the performance of what he terms “Romantic-intensity-turned-to-cool-knowledgeability” (Hills, 2005, 78)) in fans’ narrative accounts of their involvement with horror. This involves a distancing from the initial (typically childhood) identification with the horror genre and an emphasising of the intelligence of the adult fan. Hills argues that these narratives involve the construction of a split subjectivity which serves to ward off dominant criticism of fan involvement; a fan identity inspired by an initial (excessive) identification with the genre, but lived as an adult by “a contemporary valued self, aligned with cultural norms of rationality and literacy” (ibid).

He then goes on to describe this in terms of the performance of “textual agency,” a “discursive warding off of affect” (Hills, 2005, 91). This involves the ways in which the horror texts are privileged by fans in terms that:

perform and display types of [...] agency, whether this is a knowledge of narrative worlds, of specific aesthetics, or of production and genre histories. Through a range of practices, horror fans enact their fan-cultural distinctiveness and perform their ability to do things with horror, rather than discursively framing their encounter with the horror genre as one of being affected by it. And where horror is viewed as affective, then this is very much contextualized within an ongoing and reflexive, subcultural project of the self, rather than as a matter of specific, momentary or irrational ‘scares.’ (Hills, *ibid*)

Hills here suggests a cordoning off of the affective, with fans marking themselves out as other to the affected body. Hills’ horror fan thus seems to be standing against models such as the notion of all encompassing identification as ‘loss of the self’ – or how Noel Burch describes identification as a “form of ‘bondage’” (see Smith, 1995, 2).

The difference here between ‘doing things’ and ‘being affected’ resonates with a number of distinctions in fan and media studies writing; between knowledge and affect and reading versus watching. It also suggests a distinction between masculinised and feminised positions/stances in relation to the text (although this is not developed in Hills’ discussion). The warding of affect resonates with Jenkins’ use of Turkle’s distinction between cerebral/technical precision and emotion in his description of the difference between ‘male’ forms of (distanced) deduction and the “rules of female fan interpretive practice” (Jenkins, 1995, 61). The idea of sectioning off from sentimental closeness will re-emerge in Chapter 9, when I move to examining how members of COA and SHH describe their own practices as fans.

DE-ESSENTIALISING IDENTITY

The move away from essentialised conceptualisations of identity has been presented by Stuart Hall (1992) in relation to three different generalised conceptions of identity; the centred, unified “enlightenment” subject; the “sociological” subject which is configured through interaction between (a still essentialised) self and society; and the “postmodern subject” which involves a fragmentation of essentialised conceptualisations of identity.

In this third conceptualisation of identity:

Identity becomes a ‘moveable feast’: formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us. [...] It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent ‘self.’ Within us are contradictory identities, pulling us in

different directions, so that our identifications are constantly being shifted about. If we feel that we have a unified identity from birth to death it is only because we construct a comforting story or ‘narrative of the self’ about ourselves. (Hall, 1992, 277)

Here, the self is always illusory and lost. Hall identifies a number of “decentering influences”; a “series of ruptures in the discourses of modern knowledge” which have been involved in the “dislocation” of the modern subject (Hall, 1992, 285) from its essentialised moorings. These include the work and discourse analysis of Foucault on the construction of the subject, and the influence of the “linguistic turn” in the work of Lacan and Derrida (288).⁵⁷

Lacanian psychoanalytic approaches to the fixing of meaning within language demonstrate how conceptualisations of identity can be de-essentialised. This involves a development (and challenging) of the nature of the relationship between signifier and signified in the Saussurian linguistic model of the sign. In Saussure’s model this relationship is presented as relational, and there is “no inherent, essential, ‘transparent,’ self-evident or ‘natural’ connection between the signifier and the signified [...]” (Chandler, 2002, 26). The apparent stability of the bond between signifier and signified within this model has, however, been challenged by subsequent theorists from different disciplines.

Lacan emphasises the temporality of the connection between signifier and signified. In his essay “The Quilting Point” (1993/2002), he argues that “The relationship between signified and the signifier always appears fluid, always ready to come undone” (261). Within an analysis of scenes from Racine’s biblical narrative *Athaliah*, he outlines the “schema of the quilting points” - the points “around which all concrete analysis of discourse must operate” (267). He describes one such quilting point (“fear” (of God)) as:

the point at which the signified and the signifier are knotted together, between the still floating mass of meanings that are actually circulating between these two characters and the text. [...] Everything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier, similar to these little lines of force that an upholstery butting forms on the surface of material. It’s the point of convergence that enables everything that happens in this discourse to be situated retroactively and prospectively. (Lacan, 1993/2002, 268)

The quilting point thus provides a point of stability within the constant slippage of meaning-making.

⁵⁷ Marxism, Feminism, and Freud’s work on the unconscious, are the other three decentering influences Hall identifies.

The exploration of the points at which the signifier “sticks” to the signified (ibid, 264), is extended in the discourse analysis of Laclau and Mouffe (1985). In their development of Lacan’s work, these feature within an inherently political struggle; “a battle over the definition of nodal points [...] which can arrest the sliding of the many signifiers across the signified” (Anderson, 2003, 54). Laclau and Mouffe develop a de-essentialised, relational approach to conceptions of the social and to identity, arguing that:

There are not *two* planes, one of essences and the other of appearances, since there is no possibility of fixing an *ultimate* literal sense for which the symbolic would be a second and derived plane of signification. Society and social agents lack any essence, and their regularities merely consist of the relative and precarious forms of fixation which accompany the establishment of a certain order.” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, 98)

In their work quilting points are reconfigured as politicised *nodal points*;

Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, *nodal points*.” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, 112)

This fixing of meaning is presented by Laclau and Mouffe as hegemonic and always at the expense of alternative fixings; the approach to discourse analysis developed in their work involves “a political analysis of the way contingent relations become fixed in one way, but could have been fixed in many others.” (Andersen, 2003, 52). By promoting analytical sensitivity towards the regularity of these nodal points, and the potential “overdetermination” of certain points, these authors provide a way of thinking about how identities are established relationally within interactions, in terms which move beyond “essentialist, objectivist and topographical conceptions of social relations” (Howarth, 2000, 113).

EXPLORING IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF COA AND SHH

In the analysis chapters which follow, I explore issues relating to the configuration of identity at different levels – at the level of the utterance, at the level of the individual poster, the fan objects, at the level of the sites as a whole, and identity in terms of being a ‘fan’ in these settings. In Chapter 9 for example, I move from a discussion of individual avatars (discussed in Chapter 6) to consideration of the way in which being a ‘good’ fan is configured on COA and SHH.

In each case, I am interested in examining how a sense of unity is negotiated and performed within these contexts. As in my use of the term community, this approach involves a move away from essentialised approaches. As the theoretical antecedents which have informed this approach demonstrate, this move is by now well established. However research often bears the trace of essentialising, particularly when analysis goes beyond the data to inscribe motivations or suggest that the data (particularly the utterances of subjects) speaks for itself.

The focus on how identity is configured rather than identified within (any) context is important as it reveals the inadequacy of concerns about the 'absent body' seen in the debates around the move to cmc environments from the surety of the real world. My analysis reveals the points at which (and manner by which) identity is constructed and fixed within posting activity. These demonstrate how we can examine meaning making and the emerging and contested formation of identity within de-essentialised conceptualisations of the social. This corresponds with my general methodological approach in its focus on examining stabilising/destabilising moves, fixings, and regularities, rather than seeking to identify stable characteristics.

The instability of identity and struggles over this fixing are discussed in the literature on media fandoms. Leena Saarninen (2002) for example has explored "incidents of death that shattered the 'rhetorical vision'" of a *Xena: Warrior Princess* fan community. The attempt of established members to maintain activity in the face of an influx of newbies* in Baym's discussion of the meeting of, and conflict between, "Young Turks and Old Fogies" in *Tune In, Log On* (2000) can at one level be thought of as involving attempts at (in Laclau and Mouffe's terms) hegemonic moves, attempting to fix and close down the identity of being a fan and community in some ways (and in doing so, deny the legitimacy of other perspectives).

My analysis has also drawn from the emphasis on the strategic formation of identity via the marking out of similarity/difference from others. Fan studies research into the 'othering' involved in the construction of fan identities is key here. Rather than focusing specifically on the marking out of oppositions (to the inferior other), I am also interested in the marking out of alliances; how members of COA and SHH align themselves with positions both within the sites and outside of them. At the same time, I am interested in

readings and position that are closed out by these sites – moves which were illustrated in Chapter 2 in Nash’s description of how a *Beavis and Butthead*s fan site maintained its identity as “a predominantly homosocial forum” (Nash, 1999, 6) by aggressively rejecting gay readings of the series. Here the ways in which fan identities are not just established but also maintained and defended, becomes a key issue; tension between these moves runs throughout the four analysis chapters.

5.4 PEDAGOGY

Before describing how I am using this third contested term in relation to COA and SHH, I want to briefly return to the two models introduced in Section 5.2.; the community of practice and the affinity space.

Lave’s and Wenger’s work has played an important role in understanding “learning as a form of participation” (Barton and Tusting, 2005). The theory of situated learning within this model has proved to be an appealing and influential concept in education and beyond, part of “The turn to situated and relational theories of learning in the late 1980s [which] represented an important reframing of the learning process” (Handley et al, 2005, no page nos.). Their model has been recruited by scholars of identity formation and practice within the sorts of informal contexts I am looking at (for example, Davies, 2004; Papargyris and Poulymenakou, 2004; Steinkuehler, 2005; Thomas, 2005).

The concept of situated learning via legitimate peripheral participation represented a theoretical move away from transmission/assimilation models of learning which Lave and Wenger suggest are ““predicated on claims that knowledge can be decontextualized” (1991, 40). In contrast, learning as participation involves consideration of the “way knowledge takes on value for the learner in the fashioning of identities of full participation” (43):

In our view, learning is not merely situated in practice [...] learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world” (35)

Since the initial configuration of the communities of practice model, the career of participants within communities of practice as outlined in *Situated Learning* (moving from the periphery towards ‘full’ participation) has been challenged and developed by both Lave and Wenger. Handley et al note that in their more recent individual work:

There is no longer an assumption that a ‘normal’ learning trajectory is one of apprentice-to-master through legitimate-peripheral-participation learning to legitimate-full-participation, which was a common reading of *Situated Learning*. Instead Lave now uses the concept of ‘newcomers’ and ‘oldtimers’ to denote an individual’s lifespan within a community, but makes no presumption regarding the newcomer’s status as a novice, nor of his or her inevitable movement towards mastery. (Handley et al, 2005, 10)

Wenger’s work (1998a, 1998b) has opened out the concept, introducing an understanding of the ways that meaning is negotiated within communities of practice. Here:

‘peripheral’ and ‘full’ [participation] are now contrasted with ‘marginal’; non-legitimate forms of participation are introduced; and the multiplicitous and overlapping nature of communities is explicitly acknowledged. (Handley et al, 2005, 10)

Although this extension of the model has enriched the analysis - introducing forms of non-legitimate participation and the idea that communities of practice have lifecycles in terms of “stages of development” (Wenger, 1998b) - the focus remains on the maintenance of participation/practice.

The approach to pedagogy that underpins Gee’s affinity space model is a continuation of situated approaches to learning, involving identity formation through participation. Alongside this, Gee’s description of the features of the affinity space introduces a number of different types of knowledge. These include “individual knowledge,” defined as “knowledge stored in [participant’s] heads” (86); “dispersed knowledge” which “is not actually at the site itself, but at other sites or in other spaces” (86); and “tacit knowledge” that “players have built up in practice but may not be able to explicate fully in words” (86). Gee also marks a distinction between specialised and less specialised knowledge, a specialisation which is defined in relation to the games (86). These types of knowledge are presented as markers of competence within the site, and support the image of affinity spaces as informal teaching and learning environments. However, the paucity of empirical material in support of this typology, and the vaguely defined terms in which they are presented, leaves questions as to the nature of pedagogic activity in these sites unanswered.

It would be possible to look at the activity on COA and SHH in terms of the community of practice model and perhaps follow the trajectory of new members towards ‘full’ participation. This would offer an interesting perspective on the data. It would also be possible to identify examples of productivity within COA and SHH which might correspond with the typology of knowledge in Gee’s affinity space model. Although

clearly influenced by the understanding of learning as contextual and situated, my approach has been somewhat different, aiming to go beyond the identification of examples of competence within these sites, and instead seeking to examine the range of pedagogic strategies within posting activity. Specifically, I am concerned with how activity within these contexts is established, maintained, stabilised and destabilised. The community of practice model tends to focus on the maintenance and generational re-development of practices, giving less attention to the ways they are established and destabilised.

The approach I am taking follows a conceptualisation of pedagogic activity within *Social Activity Theory*. This language has been established by Dowling in the context of his own empirical work (e.g. Dowling, 1998, 2004, in press; Dowling & Brown, 2006), and in methods based texts (Brown & Dowling, 1998; Brown, Bryman and Dowling, in press). It has been recruited by a number of scholars working in the field of mathematics education, particularly in South Africa (for example, Ensor and Galant, 2004; Miguel, 2005; Hoadley, 2006). The development of Social Activity Theory has involved a series of self-titled “heretical departures” from the work of Basil Bernstein, departures which are both methodological and theoretical in nature (see Dowling, 1999, 2005b for discussion of these departures, and Dudley-Smith, 2000, who compares Bernstein’s and Dowling’s languages of description).

The conceptualisation of pedagogy as strategic action continues the interest in control and transmission in Bernstein’s work but from a general theoretical standpoint which de-essentialises the formation of pedagogic relationships, and seeks to explore the ways in which they are unsettled. Looking at the relationship between authoring and audiencing positions within posting activity in these terms, involves examining what is being transmitted, and who/how can speak, but does not involve essentialised subjects. The interest is not in how the student might ‘learn’ but instead focuses on the deployment of pedagogic strategies. To some extent this involves a broadening of the term. Whilst the analysis presented in Chapter 8 appears most explicitly to relate to issues of pedagogy because of its focus on authority, expertise, help-giving and apprenticeship, in the way that I am conceptualising this term, the stabilising and destabilising moves discussed in Chapters 6, 7 and 9 in relation to the discussion of the

fan objects, communities and identities, are considered to be pedagogic; working to close down and open up the activity in different ways.

An exemplary distinction here is between *pedagogic* and *exchange* modes of interaction (Dowling, 2001a, 2001b, in press). In the former, “the author in an interaction retains, or moves to retain, control over the principles of evaluation of their utterance” (Dowling, in press, no page nos.). However, this move to control the interaction can be accepted or rejected (acceptance/rejection would itself be a strategic move). In contrast, in exchange modes “the principles of evaluation are devolved to the audience” (ibid.); authority is in some ways negated by being open to different agents. By examining interaction in this way, we break down the distinction between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ settings/texts: the focus would in each case be on strategies by which control is claimed (or not) and how stable/unstable these moves are. Such moves will be the focus of my attention in Chapter 8 where I examine modes of authority relations in COA and SHH and how explicitly ‘pedagogic’ relationships are established and unsettled within the sites; my analysis of data in this chapter will also make use of another key distinction from Dowling’s language, a distinction between *esoteric* and *public domains* of practice (see Dowling, 1995, in press). This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

In this section as well as providing an introduction to the approach of Social Activity theory which provides the theoretical framework for my work, I have outlined certain parts of this language. The terms introduced will be recruited and discussed further in my description of the activity on COA and SHH, joined by the language that I have developed from my engagement with the data.

5.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has involved an attempt both to introduce the general theoretical approach that I have taken in my analysis of posting activity from COA and SHH, and also to clarify my use of three key terms – community, identity, and pedagogy - that will be utilised in the following chapters. Each of these terms is contested and slippery; for this reason it is important to aim for explicitness in their use. In each case, my approach has marked a move away from essentialised conceptualisations, instead focusing on the textual strategies by which these are configured within a specified activity.

The questions I am asking of this activity are driven by the general approach of Social Activity Theory. What Anderson terms the “guiding distinction” of this approach - that which “steers the observation and frames the choice of different supporting distinctions” (Anderson, 2003, 95) in different analytical strategies - is the focus on alliances and oppositions; specifically the ways in which these are established, maintained and unsettled within activity. Whilst this thesis is concerned in broad terms with the formation, maintenance and destabilisation of fandom as emergent on the forums on COA and SHH, a key interest in the chapters that follow is the range of stabilising and destabilising strategies within the posting activity on these sites. This interest – which has already been introduced in my discussion of sampling in Chapter 3 - reflects a broad conceptualisation of the activity on these sites as ongoing, temporarily settling around certain points of interest and agreement, but always in the process of flux and re-definition, and open to potential challenges.

Within this conceptualisation of activity as relational and emergent, the moves by which the sites are unsettled and stabilised at different levels of analysis have become an increasing focus of my attention during this study. This interest in de/stabilising strategies was primarily due to my concern with pedagogy; the closing down and opening up of activity was clearly of interest in relation to this. However it has also been influenced by the events which occurred during my study. As I noted in Chapter 3, some of these events were anticipated at the beginning of my research – some, however, took me by surprise. The analysis begins in the next chapter where I examine the responses of members to two such events; the hacking of SHH and the closure of the COA forums.

CHAPTER 6: IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT: AVATAR IN/STABILITY AND THE MAINTENANCE OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS

6.1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I begin to explore the configuration of community and identity within COA and SHH through an analysis of posting activity relating to two of the most severe destabilising events that occurred during my study; the hacking of SHH and the closure of the COA forums. I will examine the relationship between identity and community strategies on these sites by looking at two elements of this activity: firstly, the ways in which posters make reference to community referents as they respond to these events; and secondly how the authorship of individual avatars is revealed, unsettled, and re-asserted within this discussion.

The closure of the COA forums and the assault on SHH forced fans to re-affirm their online identities in different ways, inspiring a range of exits and returns to these sites, and moves to ensure that previously established relationships might continue. One of my main interests here is in exploring the ways that posters dealt with the potential (and actualised) instability of avatar authorship as they attempted to sustain relationships in response to these events. In these environments, usernames - like physical bodies in the real world - serve as a unifying signifier, housing a multiplicity of postings under one banner. Due to the absence of material bodies however, as discussed earlier in the thesis, the authorship of these usernames is often unclear. The activity on COA and SHH contained a number of examples of identity confusion, points at which the stability of avatars was questioned or undermined due to behaviour inconsistent with previously established 'personalities.' The efforts to re-stabilise avatar identities in relation to unified referents provides an interesting perspective on the maintenance of community relations within these sites.

Many of the hopes and fears about online life are predicated on the notion of open identity play. In this chapter I will argue that whilst the data from COA and SHH adds support to existing understandings of the multiplicity of online identities, it also demonstrates an assumed reliance upon the relatively stable and coherent nature of

online avatars within these environments. I will suggest that expectations as to the unity and ‘reliability’ of online identities serve as a central feature of the maintenance of these environments.

In exploring the responses to the hacking of SHH and the death of the forums on COA, this chapter adds to existing work on similar assaults on ‘being’ and moments of pressure within online communities - for example, the challenge to a *Xena* fan community following the death of a member of the site (Saarinen, 2002) introduced in Chapter 5. At the same time, this chapter also has interesting resonances with work relating to offline life such as that by Michael Rustin who “draws attention to the impact of wartime disruption in turning public attention to the problem of how to restore and sustain social bonds” (Frogett, 2002, 36). In Chapter 5 I said that I was interested in the relationship between COA and SHH and other sites of activity. In this chapter I will explore how the loss of the local settings (COA and SHH) provoked strategic references to a broader range of sites in order to sustain such bonds; these sites can be seen as part of a broader “virtual”⁵⁸ community relating to these fan objects, a community configured both as imagined and substantive in the posting activity.

As well as seeking to explore issues relating to the inter-relationship between community and avatar formation on these sites, this chapter is intended to provide a richer introduction to COA and SHH than has been provided so far. To some extent my task here is the presentation of the narrative of these two events as a way into these sites. Some information about these forums has already been presented in the discussion of sampling in Chapter 3, and in relation to ethics in Chapter 4. As yet I have provided little idea of the nature and style of the interactions within the sites. The aftermath of the hacking of the SHH forums and run up to the closure of the COA forums provide good entry points into the posting activity on COA and SHH, as in each case members are concerned with the health of their sites. Because of this, the discussion contains a lot of reflexive consideration of the nature and importance of these settings. For this reason, as discussed in Chapter 3, these events can be considered as critical cases; the emotive subject matter meaning that the excerpts presented here are not necessarily indicative of ‘normal’ day-to-day discussion on the forums. However, as will be seen in

⁵⁸ Here I am using the term as Dowling and Brown (2006) do – as involving imagined rather than substantive locations.

the following chapters, the forums contain numerous heightened moments in relation to other subjects.

Before examining these events I want to consider my argument in relation to the issues relating to identity and cmc that were discussed in Chapter 5. In doing so, I aim to clarify what I mean by the in/stability of avatars.

6.2 THE IN/STABILITY OF IDENTITIES ONLINE

The anxieties relating to the loss of coherent physical identity in online environments that have been introduced in the previous chapters tend to centre on the ways that identity can be re-made online; this leading to the various forms of deviant behaviour discussed in Chapter 2. The construction of avatars on COA and SHH demonstrates the possibilities for playful construction of identity within online environments. On each site, a range of identity cues is available to members from which to construct online personas (as discussed in Donath, 1999). Members choose usernames which are supplemented by a range of supporting descriptors typical on online forums: the date they joined the site; their posting numbers and related titles (see Chapter 8); and their location. On SHH these may include image based avatars or animated gifs.* The information provided may be more or less 'realistic.' Locations cited on SHH include "Ontario, Canada," "In the Swedish fog, that slowly merges with the otherworld," and "Where the hills are silent." On COA they include "Wales," "You're a lot smarter than you look. Of course, you look like a retard," and "Not within 50 feet of David Boreanaz because of the restraining order."⁵⁹ Names also serve to reflect particular emphases in interest (e.g. "Jasmine Fan" on COA, whose choice of username signals a preference for the *Angel* character Jasmine), and may have gendering connotations. The formation of an online identity through the use of such cues, enable the creative "construction of online personas" (Turkle, 1996).

The argument that I am seeking to establish in this chapter - relating to the importance of the stability of the voice and assumed authorship of these avatars on COA and SHH - is not new. A number of studies of cmc have examined the fixing of identities in

⁵⁹ These are also occasionally gendering (at one stage the description of the owner of SHH, Vixx, was : "Has Fantastic Breasts.")

online communities. Jason Rutter's and Greg Smith's (1999) paper on identity management in a Usenet newsgroup argues that the members of their research setting demonstrated a heavy reliance on the "poster's ability to know with whom they are interacting" and that:

a practised familiarity with others allows members to understand the nature of their online relationships, assess the validity of information offered to them by others, and place in context comments and actions of other posters. Unlike the often-fantastical environments of some synchronous online interaction, the identities enacted in the newsgroup are taken to be 'real' in a serious sense. When messages are posted to the group or address individuals a level of trust is offered and expected between those involved in the group. (no page nos.)

This in itself echoes work on more 'fantastical' environments; the "preoccupation in MUDs with getting a "fix" on people through fixing their gender" (Turkle, 1996, 211), and Judith Donath's suggestion that the basic premise of Usenet "is that the users are who they claim to be" (Donath, 1999, 30). In Lori Kendall's study of the newsgroup "Bluesky," Kendall suggests that Bluesky members "do not role-play, expecting that others will represent themselves more or less as they appear off-line" (Kendall, 1999, 68). She argues that this stance:

emphasizes identity continuity and interpersonal responsibility and contrasts with representations by participants and researchers who emphasize the flexibility of identity in on-line interaction (ibid)

Such work provides a very different perspective from that found in descriptions of more open identity play online, including examples of identity deception and individuals switching between personas (see Turkle, 1997).

My discussion in this chapter extends this interest by considering the performance of avatar identities in terms of stabilising and destabilising moves at a local level. Rutter and Smith's work focuses on the maintenance of identity; in the terms I am using this involves a focus on stabilising moves which - as they note - goes against some of the wilder claims about the freedom of online experience. As a result, they underplay the complication of online identities visible in the interactions on COA and SHH, and discussed by Turkle and Donath (amongst others). Deception in this latter work is often represented as intentionally destabilising. In the case of COA and SHH, there are examples of apparently unintentional points of identity confusion which reflect the nature of the environment within which participants are interacting.

Like Rutter and Smith, I will argue that the notion of members ‘knowing’ each other is central in COA and SHH, and that this depends to some extent on the continued maintenance of usernames and personas. My interest departs from their work, in that it is not the configuration of offline identities as online personas that I am interested in (even though signifiers of ‘real’ identities are presented in posts on COA and SHH in a number of ways), or the consistency between online and offline identity (the focus of work on gender deception). Instead, my interest relates to the consistency of the authorship of these avatars (as authored by the same identity over time), how they serve as a unifying referent base, and the reliance on this stability for the maintenance of community relations on these sites.

6.3 THE HACKING OF SHH

HaCKeD BY Yusuf :: [Turkish Team]- =

HaCKeD@web.com---

Information:

Sorry, but this board is currently unavailable. Please try again later”

(Message on entry page to Silent Hill Heaven forum, 14 October 2005)

In October 2005, when I attempted to visit the forums at SHH, I found that they no longer existed. I had had problems accessing the site in the past, and experienced anxious moments of ‘downtime,’ but these had only ever been temporary.⁶⁰ On this occasion, the absence of the forums was more significant. A notice announced that the site had, in fact, been hacked by “Yusuf*” and his “Turkish team.”

My initial reaction to this dramatic and unexpected event was to look to other *Silent Hill* related sites to find news of what had happened, and to seek out any now ‘homeless’ members of SHH. My first destination was www.silenthillforum.co.uk (SHF), the site that I had first looked at in 2004 when deciding to focus on *Silent Hill* fandom. Returning to SHF after a lengthy engagement with SHH, I found that I now recognised a number of the usernames on SHF. These suggested that SHH and SHF did not just have common interest, but also a cross-over of membership.

⁶⁰ On 22nd February, for example, I had experienced 3 hours when the site was down, replaced with a “This page cannot be displayed” error message.

As well as the presence of now-familiar members - including Vixx (one of the two owners of SHH and an administrator on SHF) and two SHH moderators Scarlet and Amazonagent - I found three topics on the SHF forums related specifically to the hacking of SHH. The first to be posted was a topic on the SHF forum where newbie* SHF members go to introduce themselves. This thread, *New Here! (old at SHHF⁶¹)*, served as a beacon for new arrivals at the forums' anticipated point of entry. This thread was supplemented by the official announcement of the hacking - *SHH Notice* - which was created by the SHF administrator Naomi. Naomi marked this thread as a sticky topic,* giving it high status on the forums. The post described the misfortune that SHH had faced, and offered shelter to those displaced by the assault:

I just thought that I should make members aware that Silent Hill Heaven Forums were recently hacked. I know many members here have dual membership there. I thought I should let you know so that Vixx (co-owner) doesn't get plagued with pm's⁶² & emails about it. The hack wasn't personal but led by an organised group specifically targeting php boards. Vixx will let you know either directly or via one of the SHF staff if & when the SHH boards will be up & running again. Please make sure to make welcome any SHH members that may join here in SHH's absence. (Naomi, *SHH notice*, October 2006 10:57am)

The third SHH-related thread, *All the SHH refugees check in here!* was opened by Amazonagent with the following post:

Since the attack on the server that SHH was on and the inability to get on the forums there, I figured all us refugees can check in here so that we can see some familiar faces. I've been posting here and SHH for a long time but lately had been more active at SHH. But SHF is a great place so it will be nice to hang out here too. So have fun posting here and lets get the refugee roll call going! (Amazonagent, 14 October 2005, 7:36pm)

The severity of "the inability to get on the forums" – in effect, the disappearance of the SHH 'community' – was here set against the possibility of meeting up on SHF with "familiar faces."

A number of "faces" responded to this post, including Vixx. The resulting "refugee roll call" was interesting, however, as it contained two complaints about SHH; complaints relating to the moderators who police SHH's forums. Two SHF members shared their negative experiences of SHH:

I posted 18 times there but I was too bad recieved. Seriously, SHH Moderators are a bunch of convinced Jerks who thing they are god themselves and lock EVERY FREAKIN' THING! (Kim, 14 October 2005, 11:42pm)

I use to post there, but I grew not to like that place because most of the people were rude to me and others, so I left (was Silent Hill) (Stream.of.Red.Tears, 15 October 2005, 1:38am)

⁶¹ "Silent Hill Heaven Forum.

⁶² Personal messages – members on SHH are able to contact members privately.

Such critical responses to the SHH forums offered provoking external perspectives on the site; I will return to these in Chapter 8 where I examine criticism of the site/its members from within SHH.

Amazonagent (a moderator on SHH) took this criticism well, responding to Kim; “LOL! Eh, I’m used to it. I don’t mod here so I could care less...but good to see you posting here nonetheless” (15 October 2005, 1:58am). The SHF moderator Naomi reacted differently, warning that:

If I see more “I hate SHH/I hate SHF” flame fests here, I’ve got my infamous reputation as a psychotic, tyrannical & ban happy admin at the ready. Regards Naomi (aka Elitist Admin God) [...] (Naomi, 15 October 2005, 11:21am)

Here we find the suggestion of some history of conflict between these two *Silent Hill* fan sites (in the reference to “any more” and “flame fests”). Naomi’s defence of SHH, however, was supported by another poster on the site:

“The mods at SHH were never rude, they were just doing their jobs.” (SAQOA, 15 October 2005, 7:22pm),

Whilst Naomi was marking out SHH as exempt from criticism, an acceptable shared enemy emerged: the hackers of SHH:

It’s a massive community over there but that doesn’t mean it has to be shattered because of a few no-lifers. (Naomi, 16th October 2005, 12:25am)

Have my kindred Silent Hill Heaven forumers evacuated to here, or are they mainly talking and posting somewhere else? I’d really like to know, since I’ve become so attached to the forum and people there lately. Have been reading posts on it for a long while, only recently started making some myself. And now some bastard ‘Turkish team’ has gone and ruined it. If only I can snuff their randomly-destructive lives out (if you’ll pardon my saying so). But yeah, I’d like to know where everyone went. If you can tell me, I’d appreciate it. =((Transducer, 17 October 2005, 6:25am)

Yusuf and his Turkish Team here provide a unifying referent. Their identities are unknown (as seen in the use of ““Turkish Team””), but their guilt and the seriousness of their offence undisputed. By positioning themselves in opposition to the hackers, members affiliate themselves to a broader virtual online community which must deal with the possibility of such assaults.

In this brief downtime period, SHF provided a meeting point where SHH members could congregate and maintain contact with each other. The small number of threads on SHF relating to the hacking enables some consideration of the interrelationship between these two fan sites at a crisis point for SHH. The discussion of SHH served to mark out the relationship between SHH members and those of other fan sites in terms of alliance

and opposition. Alliances were founded on unequivocal points of commonality; a shared interest in *Silent Hill* (which is reflected in participation on the sites, and the inter-membership between SHH and SHF), and the criticism of hackers. These served as potent community referents across the fan sites; although it is feasible that some of the critics of SHH on SHF may have welcomed the hacker(s) actions none went so far to say so. Oppositions were also visible, however, in the evidence of criticism of SHH which Naomi worked to limit. Whilst the sites are connected by a common object (and to some extent common membership), a number of posts established localised distinctions between SHF and SHH which read SHH in negative terms, and marked allegiance to SHF. Such differentiation continued when the SHH forums returned; here however, distinctions were to be established via a celebration of SHH and its members.

THE RETURN OF THE SHH FORUMS

On 26th October 2005 - twelve days after the site went down - a notice appeared on SHH saying that the forums should soon be returning. By the 3rd November they were back online, but in a somewhat different form.

The forums now had a new address (www.silenthillforum.com⁶³) and looked slightly different following the introduction of new header artwork. However, they retained the same formal structure and organisation (as described in Chapter 3) and the same segregation of topics for discussion within different forums. The same regulatory features and markers of status remained – the same rules of use, and standard post count feature (both of which will be discussed further in Chapter 8). The hacking had, however, emptied the forums of content, deleting the posting history of the site and of individual members. Whilst individual post counts remained, the contents of these posts had been lost. This loss was severe, but did not prove fatal: by 6th November 2005 there were already 1475 posts on the site; the process of re-building had begun.

One of the main changes to the site - the introduction of Google Ads* - proved a point of controversy. SHH had previously relied on Paypal* donations to help cover the costs of maintaining the forums. The introduction of banner advertisements – both embedded

⁶³ The url was previously www.silenthillheaven.com/forum.

within the threaded discussion and as links at the bottom of the web pages within the forums - saw the owners generating financing in a different way. A number of criticisms of these adverts were voiced on the forums, including Lucent's comment:

"Holy crap on a crap cracker, we get 'sponsor' ads between our posts now? What devilry is this? D:" (Lucent, *Oh my delicious little SHH, you have returned*, 11 November 2005, 5:16am).

The decision to introduce advertisements was defended and justified by Vixx in the following post on the *Silent Hill Post Office* forum:

We're committed to providing you with the best online forum experience as we can. As such, we've had to recruit the services of a PHPBB designer/modder in order to get the most secure and entertaining forum system that we can. No to sound like a broken record, but this means money. As such, we've introduced as unobtrusive a system as we can. Visit our sponsors through Google Ads and help us generate enough money to keep the costs of the forum down, pay for our designer/expert and keep this place fully updated and secure for the years to come. We will also be introducing a subscription service where members can pay a nominal amount for special Members Only sections of the forums and offer further paid-for advertising space. Will keep you posted! Vixx (Vixx, *Why the Ads?* 3 November 2005, 6:47am)

The introduction of advertisements are presented here as a defensive move, the exploitation of commercial forces to secure the environment. The introduction of "our sponsors" marks an alliance between fan and corporate interests (with the products advertised providing an interesting perspective on SHH – see Appendix v.). Whilst there was some opposition to this alliance from within the site, it was largely accepted, the vulnerability of the forums having been revealed by the hacking. This move reflected both the expansion and professionalising of SHH, with the importance of the newly recruited PHPBB expert demonstrated in the "blocked attacks" messages that now appeared at the bottom of SHH webpages, stark reminders of the hacking and continued threat. The idea of a subscription service involved the possibility of further commercialisation (although as I write, this is not yet offered).

WELCOME BACK!

Negative comments about the changes to the site were outweighed by the voicing of general excitement about the return of the forums. The voicing of this excitement saw SHH being privileged over other *Silent Hill*-related environments both through reference to the nature of the site, and its membership. Topics such as *What did you do while SHH was offline?*, and, *Oh My Little SHH you have returned*, contained reflections on the period of downtime and members' activities during it:

I checked on it everyday, rejoiced when the hacker's messaged was taken off and replaced by the modest "we've been hacked" image, and actually flipped out and whooped for joy when I saw it was back. (BloodyBunny, *What did you do while SHH was offline?* 5 November 2005, 6:17 am)

Upon the day the hack first occurred, I honestly flipped out. I couldn't believe it had happened. I would, out of pure habit, click on the old link in my Favorites folder, and scream at the screen when the Yusef shit came up. I then joined SAQOA's forum, but barely posted. I also rejoined the old Evil Online/Central Silent Hill crew at Hyegun, but also rarely posted. On a whim, I decided to see if Vixx had posted anything on the main site, and found the "we will be back soon message". Delighted, I waited with bated breath for this, and discovered the new forum today. I also formulated a plan to nuke Turkey. Take that, Yusef! (Drewfus, *What did you do while SHH was offline?* 4 November 2005 4:22 am)

[...] oh it was a dark time indeed without the flashlight of SHH to guide my way. I was forced to sit in the cramped squalor of SHF or the vast and empty loneliness of Black Helix. [...] (Lucent, *Oh my delicious little SHH, you have returned~*, Wed 09 Nov, 2005 8:17 pm)

The other *Silent Hill* sites referenced here – the “cramped squalor of SHF” and a site belonging to SAQOA (a poster who was quoted earlier defending the SHH moderators on SHF) - are presented as lesser sites and unworthy substitutes for SHH. These sites provide locations which suggest a broader *Silent Hill* fan community beyond SHH; this community is configured from the Internet activity of individual SHH members during the downtime.

The markers of sentimental affiliation to SHH in these posts - seen in the use of phrases such as “rejoiced” “flipped out and whooped for joy,” “delighted” and “waited with bated breath” – demonstrates the excitement that posters expressed at SHH’s return. Such excitement was seen in Withered_roses13’s post *YAY!!!*:

screams
you're back you're back you're back!
i'm back!
i thought i lost all my good silent hill buddies for good.
this is a sigh of relief
hello again! (Withered_roses13, *YAY!!!!*, Silent Hill Town Centre, 13 November 2005, 7:25pm)

The greeting presented here and reference to “my good silent hill buddies” marks an appeal to an anticipated audience. The play between “you” and “I” - which appears to refer to both the return of a singular “you” (the SHH forum) and then a group “you” (“all my buddies”) - establishes a connection both to the site and, significantly, to its members. The use of “you” here can therefore be thought of in Dowling and Brown’s terms as a community strategy, positioning togetherness.

Similar appeals to the site's membership are visible in posters' moves to re-establish their presence on the new forums. References to the re-uniting of SHH members were found in many of the "welcome back" posts on the forums:

I feel like im at one of those reunions.....in a way it is one...but being back is good (Folterung, *AHHH!!! FINALLY* , 7 November 2005, 3:13am)

Yeah...it's so good to be back... I'm glad to see ya guys again... (daymare26, 8 November 2005, 4:16pm)

In these two examples we see the projection of an assumed audience (the idea of being re-united, seeing "ya guys") to which these posters are aligning themselves. References to this imagined audience suggest a "we-ness" which is tied to a specific Internet location ("being back" is important) – this serving to promote the idea of the site as a community.

Such moves were continued in a more targeted manner in messages addressed to individual members. Whilst these served to identify and re-establish networks of relationships within the site's membership, the recognition of users was not always straightforward. With some members taking on new usernames in the aftermath of the hacking, excitement was joined with the voicing of some uncertainty as to the status of established identities, and the revelation of alternative personas within the site.

The changing nature of avatar identity can be illustrated by the return of one member, daymare26, to the forums. This poster entered the new forums with the following post:

I'm back!!! i've missed y'all soo much!!! Everything!!! Oh... right this is *BlueDemon* but my sn changed and it's better! Misscha!!! So how are ya guys???? (daymare26, *AHHH!!! FINALLY!*, Silent Hill Town Centre, 6 November 2005, 12:36am)

Here daymare26 establishes continuity between their previous username (BlueDemon) and their current name. The post contains the realisation that other members will not recognise the new username ("Oh... right this is *BlueDemon*"); the connection between old and new identities must be re-asserted in order to establish authorial continuity between these names. Two of the responses to this post make reference to daymare26's original, established name;

BLUE!!!!!!!!!! Welcome back (Folterung, 6 November 2005, 12:36am)

I was gonna say.. who is daymare i remember you Bluedemon..i don't think you remember me..good to see you again anyway (AngelFromSilentHeaven, 7 November 2005, 3:10am)

By referring to this member as "BLUE" and "blue," Folterung and AngelFromSilentHeaven address daymare26's previous incarnation. In doing so, each

establishes the duration of their participation within the site – the stated recognition (of BlueDemon) confirming their pre-hack participation within the site.

The issue of the unity and consistency of avatar authorship is seen in the following exchange:

[...] if you dont know who this is.. well its Sunderland Angle.. Or BWSunderland Angle.. (BWSunderlangle, 05 Nov 2005 4:28 am)

Lol, it's pretty obvious who you are. Welcome back.(Ethos, 05 Nov 2005 6:24 am)

Here, the name change from Sunderland Angle to BWSunderlangle is not a radical shift. As Ethos asserts, it is relatively easy to recognise the continuity between them. Elsewhere, uncertainty is visible in a response where BWSunderslangle attempts to pin down the identity of another poster:

“I dont remember you.. but it looks like you are an older member.. As am i. is this a different name or were you just not active? either way.. welcome.. (BWSunderlangle, *Oh my delicious little SHH, you have returned~*, 10 Nov 2005 1:15 am)

Whilst these moments of confusion are easily dealt with, they demonstrate an awareness of the uncertainties of the environment and attempts to sustain stable referent points in interactions; to know to whom posters are speaking. Clearly, the recognition of avatar user names is influenced by the nature of members’ experience of the site – the duration of their membership, and their posting habits. The potential affiliation referents that members can introduce are thus differentiated at an individual level from within the total history of the site. Turning now to COA, I will examine how these resources are used to include/exclude members who do not share the same reference points.

6.4 THE CLOSURE OF THE COA FORUMS

It is with great regret that I make the announcement that as of Friday the 16th December, the gates to the forums of CityofAngel.com will be closing forever [...]
(SueAngel, *Forums Closure*, 13 Dec 2005, 9:59am)

In contrast to the hacking of SHH, the closure of the COA forums in December 2005 came as less of a surprise. The fate of the forums was signalled first in February 2004 by the cancellation of *Angel*. During that time, a number of members voiced concerns about the longevity of the site, fears which were not fully alleviated by the COA staff when they confirmed that the site would continue for ‘at least’ another year. The site’s

uncertain future had also been suggested by the formal changes the site underwent (as described in Chapter 3), as well as by the nature of activity on the boards, particularly the decline in posting activity throughout 2005.

The announcement that the COA boards were to close was made by SueAngel - one of the COA Staff - who posted a message titled *Forums Closure* on the Hyperion forums on 13th December 2005. Only three days notice was provided; the boards would close on the 16th December. Having faced the loss of *Angel*, members of COA now had to deal with the loss of their forums. Despite calls for COA to be saved and for ownership of the forums to be handed over to the members - calls which were ignored by the owners - COA's fate was sealed. From a researcher's point of view, the closure of the COA forums was very different from the sudden jolt of the disappearance of the SHH forums. Rather than suddenly encountering an error message, I was able to observe forum activity until the point at which the forums disappeared.

The spread of news of the closure to other *Angel* related sites was to momentarily re-invigorate the site at the point of its termination, with a number of posters who had been absent returning to COA to say farewell. A flurry of threads devoted to the end of the forums appeared: members of COA (or 'citizens') posting their final goodbyes, sharing reminiscences, and voicing disappointment. Reaction to this loss saw posters reflecting upon COA's past, whilst looking to the future and attempting to ensure the conservation of relationships that had been established within the forums. Looking at how this past is configured demonstrates how the site was defined as a series of events which served as unifying community referents.

THE "GOOD OLD DAYS"

The thread *Favourite Moments of COA* saw the five years of COA configured via individual recollections of COA moments, the presentation of defining moments of the site's history from the viewpoints of different members:

I remember my pink tutu + Spike conversation the first time I came here. I remember fighting in the CoA codex. I rememeber my awful spelling mistakes (I still can't spell, but I'm better at it!) I remember flirting. I remember that I had fun talking to aradhus, berto, JMF, Hadeeth and some other people. ahhh good times. [.....] (Spikes Angel, 13 December 2005, 9:37 pm)

[...] Reading a fanfic that Sue wrote about Vincent Kartheiser and I back when I was in love with him, tee hee. Being kicked down a notch by a poster named Loki when I got a little too cocky about being an "oldie" Posting in long threads daily with LQ, Luvangel and the gang. Just basically being Rebel. Those were my CoA glory days... sigh (Oni_Tenshi_Rune 13 December 2005, 10:56 pm)

A number of these personal recollections contain shared references which place members at the same points in COA's history. As on SHH, such referents suggest that posters had experienced the same events; this serving to establish commonality between them. One common reference discussed by five posters in this thread, was the "shipper* wars": a series of arguments between members who favoured differing romantic pairings of *Angel* characters. These points of conflict and disagreement within the site were presented as disruptive and irritating by a number of posters, but were also attributed a nostalgic glow:

I used to hate the shipper wars and stuff back then, But I miss those times now! (Spikes Angel, 15 December 2005, 10:17pm)

I miss the times when we had the shipper wars, because after words most of the time, we would go along like nothing happened, and then the next day we would start another one and back in those days, most of the old school gang were still here, so it was great! (Spikes Angel, 15 December 2005, 10:24pm)

Although expressed in sentimentalised terms in such posts, the recollection of memorable events were on occasion tied into narratives of the site's development and transformation which suggested that whilst there had been a golden age of COA, it had been lost:

I know this will be unpopular thing to say but its time to end. [...] The legacy of this great site should not be further tarnished. Since the end of the series it has been plagued by *Jasmine Fans* and most of the good posters left to make their own forums. Its unfortunate for the few who came along after the glory days that are cool and will lose their home but hey Ive had two of my own forums lost for reasons not of my own choice, things change and we just have to go with them. Remember COA for the great site it was and join with your best freinds at whatever forum you choose there are many free hosting sites like probboards or invisionfree for the hardcore people who want to talk about Angel for years to come and let this place live forever in your memories. (Tony, *Should c.o.a. be saved?* 15 December 2005, 5:03pm)

Tony's argument presents a narrative of change in which the forums are presented as having deteriorated over time; the forums should be closed so that the "glory days" can be remembered. Whilst this argument proved broadly unpopular, the idea that the site had been better in the past received some support.

One key distinction that emerged in these posts was the differentiation between the 'old' and 'new' COA forums; specifically the move from the *Angel*, *Insane Asylum*, and *Help Desk* forums to the larger and more regimented *Hyperion* forums after the end of *Angel*

(discussed in Chapter 3). Whilst the *Hyperion* forums retained the same driving ethos (in terms of being an all ages site, with the same guiding regulations) the restructuring of the site was presented in negative terms by a number of posters:

I remember the bars threads we had! they were great! I preferred the old CoA to the new one, but still I had good times here, ahhh memories. (Spikes Angel, *Favourite Moments*, 15 Dec 2005, 9:56pm)

[...] since they changed from the old format it hasn't been the same to me either (Tony, *Should c.o.a be saved.....* 15 Dec 2005, 6:35pm)

[...] remember frantically scrolling around trying to find out where everyone was and all that? I liked the low-tech thing! (Angie, *Should c.o.a. be saved.....* 15 Dec 2005, 6.40pm)

Here the increased organisation and regulation of the site is not presented in positive terms. Instead, structural interventions are presented as restricting a particular form of engagement and pleasure when interacting with the site. At the same time, in evaluating the development of the forums, the posters are here defining their ideal COA – choosing moments that represent their favourite characteristics of COA, which (as on SHH), they privilege over other sites devoted to the same object.⁶⁴ LadySings for example, noted that “As everyone else has said, this is the only really good forum that is solely devoted to Angel” (*Favourite Moments in COA*, 13 Dec 2005, 11:25 pm).

ESTABLISHING ALLIANCES WITHIN COA

In the interaction presented above, references to a more authentic past serve to establish an alliance between Spikes Angel, Tony, Angie, and shanshuvamp_angel. Such references serve to mark differences between old and new members via the provision of shared experience of that history, the use of knowledge “topical to the group” which Rutter and Smith suggest helps posters develop a sense of belongingness (1999a). In the short period before the closure of the forums, such references served to re-establish this sense of belongingness and commonality. The bonding of established members and peers was bolstered by the return of certain members; Spikes Angel, for example, responded to the return of one member, SHADOKA, “Shadoka! *Waves*long time no speak!” This bonding via references to the past does not just re-establish connections, but also serves to exclude newer members. This is made explicit in a number of the posts that I have presented above; it is visible in Tony’s reference to the loss of “most of the good posters,” and in Spikes Angel’s comment on “the old school gang.” Less well

⁶⁴ I will return to the selection of essential COA characteristics in my discussion of nostalgia in the next chapter.

established members voiced discomfort in the face of this discussion: “well...the new gang is cool....*feels left out*” (jesusfrks05, 15 December 2005, 10:26pm). Spikes Angel’s response “yeah some of you are cool” (15 December 2005, 10:30pm), is comforting, but does not lessen the separation between the more established and newer members.

As well as general thanks to the site’s organisers and expression of sadness at the closure of the forums, posts from this period contain frequent references to subgroupings of favourite members, established via the use of yearbook style “shout-outs.” These serve two functions (as described by contributors to the Internet-based “Urban Dictionary”⁶⁵); both aligning friendships and conveying public thank-you’s. As in the shout-outs to specific members on SHH, these affiliating moves serve to mark out specific groups from within the total membership. Such moves are illustrated in the following post:

[...] Here's a glass to Sue and Bluebear for babysitting us! Here's to my CoA gang, for better or worse: Insane Troll Logic (he always appeared when I called), Estajaydee, my beloved onion, Tony, Technopagan (may he RIP wherever he is), Ebony, VampGirl, Vigilante, Spikeslover, NyAngel, Nirvanaliz, Randall Flagg (who I didn't like at first but now I have actually met in person and talk to in some way everyday!), Drake, Shadoka, Maud (despite the water under the bridge), DeeBee, OutforawalkB, Microtech, Suzi, Njal, Bite Me, Ernold Same & D, Dragon, Slayer's Hostage, Scruffy, Methos, and so many more. [...] Thank you guys! Couldn't have made it through the end of Angel without you! (Angie, 14 December 2005, 1:30pm)

Listing activities/events and favourite members in such posts, COA citizens identified particular alliances within the forum activity. Alongside the expression of friendship, the warmth within these messages was extended to posters who had previously inspired annoyance:

i met some 'cool cats' on this board...heck i met some shites aswell.....but i think even the people i dont like have made this the forum that it was..... Soo...to all you tits...i salute you, and would buy you adrink any day of the week... [...] (bored of the dead, 15 Dec 2005, 12:43 am)

At this point of uncertainty, such members were presented as an integral part of the site’s history.

The stated emphasis of relationships and friendship within these posts appears to support claims that “the sense of community that exists [in the newsgroup] relies heavily on posters’ ability to know with whom they are interacting” (Rutter and Smith, 1999, 1). As with the return of members to the new SHH forums and my own

⁶⁵ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=shout-out>

recognition of SHH members on SHF, there is the underpinning presumption here that those who made up “The Slackers Gang,” or the numerous usernames cited by Angie, represent stable identities. Only some of these, as cited above, appear to have met offline (which would support the understanding of the originating author). In looking at how the posters consider their life after COA, we will see how the multiplicity of online identities is also recognised within this activity.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Alongside shared recollection of elements of COA’s past, discussion focused on the future. In *Life after CoA*, SueAngel opened a thread for members to network, noting:

[...] Please use this thread to detail other sites you may frequent. For the last remaining days I will switch on the PM⁶⁶ facility to allow you to pass on personal details to one another so they are not aired publicly. One of the reasons I will be gutted that the forums will cease to be are the friendships that so many people have made with one another. I wish you all well. (SueAngel, *Life After CoA*, 13 December 2006, 1:09pm)

Here, as with the sites mentioned by members of SHH in discussion of their activities during the SHH forum’s downtime, the interrelationship between sites and settings becomes central (Ernold same noting “I wonder where the refugees will scatter :O.” (*Life After COA*, 13 December 2005 2:39pm).

A number of posters suggested other locations where they could meet and continue their interactions after the closure of the forums:

<http://slayerfest2.proboards41.com/index.cgi> that’s my crib. well, it’s not actually “mine” per se. Anyway it’s where all the forum favourites hang out. Or...my forum favourites. You can find me there (hurrah!) and ernoldsam and lbsame and Scooby Groupie and spikerules and the artist formerly known as Spike’s Angel and many other lovely people besides. (JamesMFan, 13 December 2005, 2:30pm)

There are a bunch of old CoAers on www.immortalrealm.net. It’s not open registration, so you will have to email for an account set up. We have buffy and angel boards, plus a whole lot of other stuff. (Angie, 14 December 2005, 4:36pm)

As with the introduction of other *Silent Hill* sites on SHH, such posts suggest the webs of external sites that COA is linked to by its member’s activities. These provide examples of locations within the global *Angel/BtVS* fan community to which the site’s members must now turn. The sites most frequently referenced in these posts share an interest in these two series; sites such as Buffy-Boards.com and immortalrealm.net provide potential settings for continued interaction. As SueAngel’s post suggests, the

⁶⁶ Personal messaging.

issue of how COA members would identify each other outside of the forums remained a pressing issue. One main reason for this - aside from the absent-bodies in these environments - was the multiplicity of usernames in different settings. With only a limited number of references to real-world events (such as *Angel* conventions), the connections here (as on SHH) appeared mostly to have been established online. The provision of names and contact details in relation to different (external) sites of practice demonstrated attempts to enable members to contact, locate and identify each other on other sites, and via other mediums.

This can be illustrated by reference to one of the responses to SueAngel's post. Here, bored of the dead voices their hope that friendships established on the site will survive after the closure, and provides a range of contact details⁶⁷:

Thank you Sue, it's the friendships i shall miss. I frequent www.Buffy-boards.com [public access site] it's a nice site, very busy, lacks a certain amount of maturity that this site has (but that might be down to me being there). IF you wish to join, i'm Dial DeLa Mierta; and i know a few posters from here post there, Aly, Dark Avenger13, SVA, Wesley_WyndamPryce and a few others....please come and say hi.....and fanfic friends....i still post there (though i had expected to post my final part here on Christmas Day)
You can also contact me on
@yahoo.co.uk
that's my EMAIL and YIM
@hotmail.co.uk
that's my MSNM
[]
that's my AIM
all of you, are welcome to contact me, just because we haven't chated much, doesn't mean we cant.....want to give me your details.....PM me.. (bored of the dead, 13 December 2005 1:18pm)

18 of the 27 members who posted on this thread made similar posts; sharing MSN, AOL and email details along with MySpace* and livejournal* addresses. Some of the data available on such sites is available COA, but not all. The exchange of such links, addresses and names, involved an extension and rounding out of the offline identities of these members.

As on SHH, the potentially unsettling issue of the unity (or otherwise) of individual usernames emerged in this activity. This can be demonstrated via reference to two discussions about memorable posters. The first relates to the member Aradhus. In the thread *Favourite moments in COA*; jesusfrks05 recalls a conversation (or argument) with Aradhus about religion. Spikes Angel responds:

⁶⁷ As I discussed in Chapter 4, because of the nature of this information I have removed the usernames from the email addresses.

ohh Aradhus, I miss him, he got banned didn't he? [...] Spikes Angel, 15 Dec 2005, 10:03 pm

The response of Angel Acolyte suggests that Aradhus now has a new name:

[...] I got banned about a dozen times! [...] (Angel Acolyte, 15 Dec 2005, 10:05 pm)

This post is met with surprise and excitement:

no way...AA is really Aradhus? Who would have ever guessed? (jesusfrks05 15 Dec 2005, 10:06 pm)

you're alive? hooray! [...] Spikes Angel 15 Dec 2005, 10:08 pm

In contrast, jesusfrks05 challenges the difficulty of identifying Aradhus and Angel Acolyte as the same poster:

What?!? I'm shocked!!!!!! me too! Why...i never once thought- okay, cant lie anymore. If it WASNT obvious, then...well, tact is just not telling the truth, so...you're a dumbass! (jesusfrks05 15 Dec 2005, 10:12pm)

The fact that Angel Acolyte is (or is claiming to be) Aradhus is here presented both in terms of the voicing of surprise (did not realise that was the same poster) and the blatancy of the fact that they are the same (“you’re a dumbass!”). These different responses involve opposing perceptions of the strength or weakness of the resemblance of voice (as signifier of consistent identity) across different usernames.

The issue of authorial voice is also seen when a poster takes the name of an established poster in the thread *SAVE COA!*:

SAVE C.O.A NOW. Or i start crying and pull off a puppy-look... Just because they cancelled Angel, for goodness sake! They even took teh Angel Mag to Buffy Mag already! BAH HUMBUG! (Dark Avenger, 14 December 2005, 5:20pm)

Responses question the authenticity of this voice in respect to a reference point from the past, another Dark Avenger:

Hahahaha I certainly hope that isn't THA Dark Avenger, as his standards of 'coolness' would have gone WAY down. No offense meant to the present Dark Avenger (D, 14 December 2005, 6:33pm)

lol Yeah definitely isn't the Dark Avenger that I remember either The guy had skills (SHADOKA, 14 December 2005, 6:40pm)

The use of the definite article “THA” privileges the original Dark Avenger over the current one, with the skills to which SHADOKA is referring celebrated in the recollections of Dark Avenger’s unique style of posting:

oh he was a strange one, didnt he vanilla ice every post (Maud, 14 December 2005, 6:44pm)

He certainly did what a coa legend . (ernold same, 14 December 2005, 7:04pm)

In response to these posts, the ‘new’ Dark Avenger declares themselves hurt at being compared to their namesake;

NO! it is only Dark Avenger NOT the other ones how could you guys get me confused with them? Oh and i'm not a bloke either.... just because i cracked a little joke... (Dark Avenger, 14 December 2005, 7:07pm)

And is reassured by ernold same;

we're not having a pop at you , its the other one who would post only in macho rap speak , despite being a white dwarf (ernold same, 14 December 2005, 7:09pm)

In this discussion - as in references to BlueDemon on SHH – the past is honoured. Recollection of Dark Avenger’s posting style demonstrates how such memories serve as a bonding community resource; again this is (to some extent) at the expense of newer members.

The discussion of Dark Avenger’s voice here involves expectations about how certain posters behave, and demonstrate how posts are evaluated/legitimated in relation to this. The difference between the current and original Dark Avenger is read from the style of posting. This discussion also indicates the gendering of such voices – here the gender of Dark Avenger is fixed (the use of “he,” “I’m not a bloke either” etc) and the new Dark Avenger establishes ‘her’ difference from the previous Dark Avenger in relation to gender.⁶⁸

6.5 CONCLUSION

The response to the hacking of SHH and closure of the forums on COA presented in this chapter contains a range of “affiliation” and “community” strategies (Dowling and Brown, 2006) which serve to establish commonality and togetherness between participants (ibid). Appeals to sub-groupings of members in shout-outs, for example, are strategic, working to establish alliances within the population. The history of the sites as imagined within the posting activity also proved to inspire a wealth of community referents. The nostalgic focus on the past on COA – and in particular the discussion of the site’s lost golden age - was perhaps unsurprising as the forums were about to close.

⁶⁸ See Danet (1998), on the fixing of gender online.

By placing themselves ‘at the scene’ during events from the past, members aligned themselves with the site and each other. In doing so, they also (re)affirmed their status as experienced old timers, and marked themselves as different from newer members. The deployment of community strategies can therefore be seen to be tied into the formation of individual avatar identity within these settings. For this to be successful, and for their position to be recognised, however, avatars would have to be stable (i.e. the posters would have to know to whom they are speaking). Here, then, the commonality of ownership and authorship of a history of multiple posts under one username becomes significant.

The formation of such alliances underlines the importance of authorial consistency over time. Development of familiarity and recognisability of identities is key to the discussion, in order that members can get to ‘know’ each other. This expectation of authorial consistency is established as ‘norms’ in different ways within the sites, Indeed on COA, it stated explicitly in the site’s rules of use:

Try to maintain (1) posting name. People like to get to know you and it’s hard to know you if there are several of you. (COA Administration, *A Few Things to Consider Before Posting....*, 17 Feb 2005, 11:47pm)

The presumption that personas are unified (have one author) and that the authorship is consistent is seen in the data presented in this chapter in discussion of recognisable characters (with recognisable voices). Characteristic personalities are established from multiple utterances, enabling usernames to establish specific reputations within the sites (having the potential to become “legends”). In exploring these expectations, and how they underpin the maintenance of community relationships, this chapter supports work which has argued that members of online communities place great importance on the stability of online identities.

This chapter also contains examples of incidents where it becomes apparent that the authorship of avatars is not stable. The nature of the hacking of SHH and closure of COA forced attention on connections between members and in doing so revealed the uncertainties about the consistency of avatar authorship (is this the same person to whom I was speaking previously?). Discussion of Dark Avenger on COA demonstrates that more than one user can occupy the same username and, as seen in the discussion of Aradhus, members may change their usernames at will. Alongside expressions of

excitement about the posters returning – with ‘old timers’ entering the discussion and being welcomed as old/missed friends - there is uncertainty and surprise when members do not behave in characteristic ways.

This focuses attention on the strategic construction, maintenance, and shifting of avatars in online environments. If it is ‘normal’ to keep the same name and develop characteristic persona, changing your voice and/or taking on another (or someone else’s) name is potentially destabilising, potentially a political move. At the same time, some names are more charged than others with significance within these sites. What are the repercussions of taking or emulating the name of an established member? We can begin to think about the ways in which usernames can perhaps serve as a mechanism of authority within this site, raising interesting questions. Who can and cannot change their name? It might be expected that if a member seeks to establish themselves within the site, during the earlier stages of the construction of an identity within these settings it would be necessary to maintain at least initially a coherent voice in order to establish a history of posting activity. This would enable other members to get to ‘know’ them. In contrast, whilst two moderators, Miss Krissy and The Adversary, changed their names during my study (to Krist. and St. Thomas respectively), they perhaps have little to lose from doing so (their titles and post counts securing their positions). Some more recognised members such as the owner of SHH, Vixx - who adopts the same username on SHF - might not benefit from changing their name.

The awareness of the importance of the continuity of voice demonstrates the relationship between the maintenance of individual usernames and the establishment and maintenance of community relations which are founded on forming alliances/oppositions with these usernames. In discussion of the history of these sites, whilst both sites demonstrate sentimental affiliation to the sites and their members, there is some criticism of developments at a community level; relating to the organisation of the sites, annoying posters, and the loss of a golden age voiced on COA. Here tensions that had been running through previous activity become an explicit topic of discussion in relation to the history of the sites. Such tensions and conflicts will be explored in Chapter 8 in relation to modes of authority within these settings. In the next chapter, I will explore what happens when it is the object of fan affiliation that changes in ways in which the posters may not like. This extends the consideration of the ways in which

members of these sites objectify their environments into an exploration of how they conceptualise their 'loved objects.'

CHAPTER 7: CONSTRUCTING THE OBJECT OF FAN AFFILIATION: MODES OF NOSTALGIA AND IDENTIFICATION

7.1 INTRODUCTION

My interest in this chapter is in the ways that fans constitute the objects of their fan affiliation within posting activity on COA and SHH. In both sites, the fans' 'loved object' serves as a centripetal force, providing the stability of a shared interest, drawing members/visitors to the sites, and - despite the internal factions that may develop - providing a commonality of an interested fan 'us' (in contrast to the 'they' of non-fans of these texts⁶⁹). Despite this, the relationship between fans and serial forms of entertainment is by no means straightforward or necessarily harmonious, and may be challenged; this is particularly the case when the series is taken in new or undesired directions.

COA and SHH are devoted to serial texts which rely upon, and must contain, varying degrees of change and transformation. Change is necessary if a series is to evolve. Yet, in the face of audience expectations, innovation must be balanced against the provision of established title or generic characteristics and a respect for continuity. When this continuity is breached fans are often quick to voice their displeasure. In saying this, it is important to note that the desire for consistency of a fictional universe that I will suggest is visible on COA and SHH may go against other fan sites and activity; particularly those relating to other videogames. Jesper Juul for example, has argued that "the fictional worlds of many games are contradictory and incoherent" and that some gamers "may dismiss [the fiction] as unimportant decoration of the game rules." (Juul, 2005, 6). However, in survival horror* games in general, and *Silent Hill* in particular, the narrative development of a fictional universe is often emphasised. As discussed in Chapter 3, the fictional element of *Silent Hill* has been tied into the marketing of the series. The posting activity on both COA and SHH demonstrates moves towards consistency and the "active construction of a textual unity" (Wilson, 1993, 73) that is at the heart of many theoretical approaches to reader-research and film spectatorship.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ A relationship which will be explored further in Chapter 9.

⁷⁰ This emphasis is seen for example in the construction of the fabula in Russian formalist analysis of film (see Bordwell, 1985); and Thomas Elsaesser's conceptualisation of the film reader driven by expectations of consistency (Wilson, 1993, 73). Such approaches to spectatorship explore the ways in which audiences

However the nature of this unity and consistency is not unproblematic, and can serve to incite the formation of alliances and oppositions within the settings.

One of the concerns that I raised in relation to Gee's concept of the affinity space in Chapter 5 related to the apparently stable nature of affinity that it suggested. During my study I have become increasingly interested in the ways that members of COA and SHH present their affiliation as having been challenged or stretched, and how criticisms and the voicing of disillusionment is handled within these settings. In this chapter I explore members' responses to different types of change; formal developments such as changing storylines and aesthetic changes, and also events in the 'careers' of the fan texts such as the cancellation of *Angel* in 2004. These events - and the fans' responses to them - provide an opportunity to examine the voicing of expectation and negotiation of textual 'authenticity' in these settings. By examining negative as well as positive stances in relation to the fan objects in this chapter, I will consider the idea of *antifandom* (Gray, 2003, 2005) as manifest in posting activity.

It is worth clarifying my use of the terms *object* and *text* at this point. The move from text(s) to object is here presented as an ontologising strategy, "insofar as [the author lays] claim to an effectivity within a region of practice that is beyond their own discourse" (Dowling, 2001, no page nos.). The term therefore refers to a higher level of abstraction than the *Silent Hill* and *Angel* texts, by which I refer to the primary material presented under these banners; for example the 110 episodes of *Angel*, and the 5 *Silent Hill* games. The multiple primary texts of *Silent Hill* and *Angel* can therefore be seen to be recruited in the construction of the objects '*Silent Hill*' and '*Angel*.'

The chapter is in four sections. I begin by positioning the analysis within a brief consideration of the discussion of 'seriality' in media/cultural studies, focusing on the ways that continuity within such forms of entertainment is established and breached. This is followed by two sections which outline the conceptual language I have developed in relation to these issues. The first presents an exploration of the ways in which the members of COA and SHH establish abstracted conceptualisations of their

deal with the gaps in texts as they construct meaning, as well as how the texts may intentionally or unintentionally work to contradict their work (see Branigan, (1992) for discussion of how audiences fill in "missing" data and the ways "that a text may disrupt a perceiver's expectations" (16)).

favoured texts; strategies that, I will argue, privilege differing modes of nostalgia. Whilst this concept has been used in relation to media texts this has typically been in relation to ‘retro’ forms of entertainment; my use of this term provides a way of thinking about the maintenance of affiliation to an object in more general terms. I then consider the ways members work to maintain their identification with the fan objects as they endeavour to accommodate, evaluate, and interpret textual transformation (particularly localised discrepancies within the text). This section examines the ways in which breaches in identification are established, defended and also dealt with within these sites. In the final section, I use this conceptual language in the analysis of posting activity relating to two secondary texts; the *Silent Hill* film, and the film version of *Firefly, Serenity*. In doing so - as in my discussion of avatar in/stability in the previous chapter - I seek to demonstrate how posters’ moves are tied into the maintenance of community relations within the site.

7.2 SERIAL FORMS OF ENTERTAINMENT AND THE CHALLENGES OF “NOVELTY-WITHIN-CONVENTION”

Doctor Who, although it is a fiction – it is like you took the American series *Dallas*, for instance, and you tried to contradict a fact that happened a year before. All of the fans of the programme would be in uproar because they follow it avidly. The same with *Coronation Street* in Britain – millions of people watch it every week, and they remember what happened ten years ago. You can’t change the basic facts...” (*Doctor Who* historian Ian Levine, cited in Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983, 65).

The balancing act between ‘sameness’ and ‘transformation’ in serial forms of entertainment has been examined in a number of studies of media texts. In a discussion of the multiple regenerations of The Doctor in *Dr Who* for example, John Tulloch and Manuel Alvarado (1983) discuss how the show’s producers must work “for similarity and continuity to establish programme identity, orderliness and stability” (Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983, 63). They suggest that:

The success of the programme (its audience size and longevity) must depend on this [...] ‘success’ (its tension between novelty and sameness) [...] (63)

This play between similarity and difference - which they describe as “novelty-within-convention” – is related by Tulloch and Alvarado to the characteristic “flow and regularity” of the television medium. Going on to examine the ‘sameness’ that sustains *Doctor Who*, through an analysis of the themes, settings, conventions and characters of the series that are maintained across changes, they suggest that despite the numerous

actors that have played the character, there is an essential nature to the Doctor.⁷¹ Tulloch and Alvarado describe how producers maintain “the shared typification as to the ‘reality’ and ‘continuity’ of the show” (63) via the deployment of a range of conventions. These include “authenticating” conventions (for example, “Would this kind of character act this way in this kind of situation” (67)) and more general “rhetorical” conventions (one example being the “realist illusion of diegesis” (67)). They describe a regeneration that appeared to go against these established (and expected) conventions, and caused audience unhappiness (67). Underpinning this discontent is an understanding of the ‘logic’ of the text that produces the framework from which ‘plausibility’ and ‘coherency’ are identified as abstractions from primary textual material. This leads to the idea that the Doctor should behave in some ways (but not others).

The exploration of fan dissatisfaction in response to textual discontinuity has been examined in relation to fans’ negotiation of textual ‘canonicity.’ In *Textual Poachers*, for example, Jenkins argues that certain episodes of *Star Trek* are particularly disliked because of fans’ responses to the formal elements of the text. He suggests that “Many fans justify these judgements according to general criteria applicable to any classical narrative,” going on to add that:

More often, however, individual episodes are evaluated against an idealized conception of the series, according to their conformity with the hopes and expectations the reader has for the series’ potential development. This program ‘tradition’ is abstracted from the sum total of available material and yet provides consistent criteria for evaluating each new addition. (Jenkins, 1992, 97)

This abstraction may be regarded as providing stability from the multiple experiences of the text - establishing a perspective from which discrepancies within the text are recognised.

Two main distinctions can be made here; discrepancies between the text and the stated desires/expectations of the fan audience; and discrepancies within the text (or texts). There are a number of examples of the former in the literature, including fans’ negative responses to the regeneration of the first to second Doctors referenced above (Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983). In the context of soap opera audiences Baym (2000) has

⁷¹ “Central to the Doctor’s definitions, and constant throughout all his different forms, has been science fiction’s definition of the ‘human’ as powerful but fragile, rational but irrational, material but spiritual too.” (Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983, 76)

documented fans' conflicting responses to a storyline in *All My Children*, and Harrington and Bielby (1995) have described fan grievances in terms of a struggle over authorship, with fans' establishing "moral" claims to ownership. In the context of film production, Brooker (2000) describes how the 1989 film *Batman* failed to "enter into fan 'continuity'" as an "authentic representation of the character" because of unhappiness with the casting of Michael Keaton (Brooker, 2000, 288). In the context of videogames, this evaluation of textual authenticity by fans is tied to the evaluation of the aesthetic nature of new texts; the backlash against *Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee* on some fan forums attributed to the change of voice artist for an established character from the series (Schott, 2003), and descriptions of the "anger, denial and reverence" in fans' responses to the introduction of a cell-shaded⁷² aesthetic in *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* (Newman, 2004, 153). More broadly, debates about the relative merits of elements and episodes of serial texts have also been explored. Marianne Cantwell (2004) for example, has examined what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' *BtVS* in *BtVS* fan communities and how some writers receive particular praise/dislike.

The expression of negative responses to textual material has been considered by Jonathan Gray in relation to what he terms *antifandom* (2003, 2005). Gray argues that it is important to recognise and examine the variety of positions which consumers take towards texts, rather than just the positive affiliation typically documented by fan researchers. In a paper on *nonfan* and *antifan* responses to the animated series *The Simpsons*, Gray describes the antifan as "those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel" (2003, 70). In a more recent discussion of the television website *Television Without Pity*, he suggests points at which "antifan discussion connects with and echoes fan discussion, hence refuting the notion that the two are pure and polar opposites" (2005, 841). The reasons for the displeasure in this context are split by Gray into two broad motivating criticisms: "moral objections", described in relation to the "moral lens" which saw a contestant in *The Apprentice* strategically marked out as an "odious moral text" by fans in a variety of ways (for setting a bad example for African American women in the workplace, and for her "bad" behaviour in general (849)); and "aesthetic evaluation" (849) "provoked by a supposedly poor level of realism or sense" (852). He suggests

⁷² A type of animation.

that moral objections have added status as they “can at least appear more principled, or even concrete, than can the rather subjective territory of aesthetic evaluation” (849). By emphasising the connections between fan and “antifan” positions, Gray notes that antifan expressions are not always voiced by those who stand broadly in opposition to the object, but can also be voiced by the devoted fan audience. I will return to this work later in the chapter.

Such displeasure does not always relate to disliked elements of the text; discontinuities within the text(s) are also potentially problematic. These may represent varying degrees of severity. One of the most infamous challenges to fans’ investment in a serial text, for example, occurred when the character Bobby Ewing stepped out of the shower at the beginning of the eighth season of *Dallas*. The revelation that Bobby Ewing was not dead, but that his wife Pam had in fact been dreaming, negated an entire season’s worth of plotlines and character development (Season Seven is now known as the “dream season”⁷³). This moment served as a violent wrecking of “worked” identification with the object – the ultimate ‘jump the shark’* moment. This is one of the most extreme examples in television history, as it involved not just a discontinuity, but a “reboot” of the text. This distinction is made at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Retcon>, where a reboot is described as being “analogous to the process of rebooting a computer, clearing out all working memory and reloading the operating system from scratch.” Other less severe examples have been documented in the fan studies literature. In the context of soap opera for instance, we find discussion of the violation of a “shared history” (Allen, 1995); Harrington and Bielby (1995) describing how producers’ disrespect for chronology infuriates long-term viewers. At a local level, discontinuities within the diegesis can also be identified. Here we find continuity errors, which have been largely ignored in academic work, but which are documented on the archives of sites such as continuitycorner.com.

More broadly, deliberate moves to address and correct discontinuity have been conceptualised as “retroactive continuity” (a ‘retcon,’ ‘retconning’). A retcon is defined on [wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Retcon) as: “the adding of new information to "historical" material, or

⁷³ See the FAQ at <http://www.ultimatedallas.com/episodeguide/dreamzonefaq.htm> last accessed 6 June 2006.

deliberately changing previously established facts in a work of serial fiction.⁷⁴ These can be unofficially sanctioned (in fanfics/fan speculation), or located within the primary text, and are common in episodic forms of entertainment (particularly in comic books). Wikipedia makes reference to a number of examples from different mediums, including one originating within the television comedy *Cheers*:

In the sitcom *Cheers*, Frasier Crane said that his father was a deceased research scientist. However, the spin-off *Frasier* featured Frasier's father Martin as an ex-cop living in Seattle. Frasier later explained that he had lied to his friends in Boston after having a bitter argument with his father.

There is a plurality of possible retcons, depending on whether they add to, alter, or remove material from past continuity. Such moves are visible in fan attempts to correct discontinuities; here, for example, we find the various fan theories relating to the “Klingon Forehead Problem” in *Star Trek* – the fact that Klingons’ appearance shifted during the series - a discontinuity that the text has playfully acknowledged (see Appendix vi.). These include the idea that there may be two races of Klingon or that the difference is due to ‘genetic fusion’ or ‘surgical alteration.’⁷⁵ Such work is related to the establishment of ‘fanon’: fan produced explanations/expansions of the canon material that have developed canonical legitimacy within fan cultures, despite not being officially confirmed.

The acceptability of potentially discontinuous events here is clearly context dependent. In her discussion of narrative and the generic elasticity of cult television, Roberta Pearson (2003) describes how, whilst the Dallas ‘reboot’ was unacceptable to audiences, fans of *Star Trek* accepted the playful flash-forwards in the final episodes of *Star Trek: Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Voyager*. In contrast, she suggests that *Star Trek: Enterprise* has been perceived as problematic because of its continuity violations leading some fans to exclude it from the *Star Trek* canon. As I suggested in the introduction, it is possible that fans in other contexts may engage with texts that deny the possibility of coherence. On both COA and SHH however - as shall be discussed in more detail in the following sections - the desire for coherency and consistency of the fan objects is established and reinforced by many posters in their posting activity. At the same time, it is also evident that some members are open to change and development.

⁷⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Retcon>

⁷⁵ See <http://www.khemorex-klinzhai.de/faqs/races.faq>

7.3 MODES OF NOSTALGIA

My interest in this section is the negotiation of the appeal and essential features of *Silent Hill* and *Angel* within the posting activity on COA and SHH; this will be considered in terms of a modality of nostalgia.

When used in relation to media products and audiences, ‘nostalgia’ typically refers to some interest in classic or ‘retro’ texts. In this section, I propose a move beyond such everyday conceptualisations of nostalgia, towards thinking of nostalgia relationally. This involves the consideration of the ways in which the fans on SHH and COA express their affiliation to, and longing for, their favoured objects. I will argue that the varying emphases in their moves - particularly in responses to challenges to the stability of their objects (for example the release of new material) - enable the marking out of analytical distinctions between differing modes of nostalgia within these settings. This broadening move resonates with recent work on the translation and localisation of videogames for different markets, which suggests a consideration of the essential elements of a videogame that must be maintained as it is carried across cultures (Bacha, 2005). Whilst extending the use of the term in this way, I do not want to lose the ways in which ‘nostalgia’ is already loaded with meaning. The idea of homesickness, longing or memory for a past state, for example, is retained, with the notion of homesickness particularly significant for the discussion of SHH which is to follow.

The analysis of nostalgia in COA and SHH presented in this chapter was initiated by my examination of fan responses to *Silent Hill 4: The Room* (SH4), a primary text which proved a destabilising influence on the forums. Responses to this game demonstrated opposing views of the ‘essence’ of *Silent Hill*, based on the identification of fundamental *Silent Hill* elements. This abstraction can be seen to be linked to the establishment of an abstracted textual coherency discussed in the previous section; for example the discussion of that which serves to create the “ideal” *Star Trek*, the “meta-text against which a film or episode is evaluated” (Jenkins, 1992, 98). By examining how such abstraction is tied into the formation of social relations, I here go beyond the idea of the individual’s “ideal” meta-texts which informs their own reception, to examining the strategic negotiation of the meta-text within collective positing activity.

My use of the term nostalgia here - whilst suggesting a desire or longing for a return to an idealised state - is not intended to suggest a unified or established reference point. Nostalgia in such contexts can instead be seen as an emergent and only temporarily stable phenomenon of the oppositions and alliances which pattern the activity on these forums. Examining how individual perspectives construct nostalgic stances in respect of the ‘object’ of fan affiliation, challenges monolithic or static definitions of nostalgia; nostalgia is instead considered as emergent points of contested stability within the settings.

MODES OF NOSTALGIA ON SHH: SILENT HILL 4 (SH4).

I feel betrayed, the ones we love betray us in the end and team Silent is no exception, they took our money and ran. And that’s the difference between Dracula and Underworld and SH2 and SH4. Look kinda the same don’t they only two numbers apart, not even close my friends. SH4 can dress up in its big brothers clothes but it still trips over the pant leg... Well you get the idea, SH4 sucks the root! (posting on *SH4* forum).

SH4 proved a controversial addition to the *Silent Hill* series not just because of its production history (the game had initially been a separate title but was pulled into the series), but also because it challenged a number of the series’ conventions. The game introduced a first-person perspective (the previous games were played fully in the third-person), new characters and storyline, and a new menu system, and removed two key *Silent Hill* items – the flashlight and the radio. Two changes were particularly significant. Firstly, the game was not set in the fictional town of *Silent Hill* but in the ‘neighbouring’ South Ashfield.⁷⁶ Secondly, SH4 marked a move away from the linear exploration models of SH1-3 to a new cyclical “return-to-the-room” scenario. The game begins with the protagonist Henry Townsend trapped in his apartment; Room 302 of Ashburnham Heights, the ‘Room’ of the title. Henry is able to escape to visit a range of levels/worlds, only to repeatedly awaken from ‘sleep’ to find himself once again trapped in the apartment.

These changes fed into discussion of the game’s right to bear the title ‘*Silent Hill*,’ with some members suggesting that it should be considered a separate survival horror game. One member noted that the new game “is ultimately turning out to be the most ‘Love it

⁷⁶ Although fans have since established that the woods which serve as a location in SH4 are near to Silent Hill.

or Hate It' out of the series." My focus here is on two lengthy threads from the SH4 forum: *SH4 Venting Area* (132 posts), and *I'm Disappointed and My Head Hurts* (139 posts)⁷⁷; each contained prolonged discussion and argument about the new game. In these threads those who supported the game argued with what one outspoken critic of the game referred to as "my SH4 bashing brothers and sisters" (Bethor, *SH4 Venting Area*, 19 Oct 2004, 02:17am). In each thread there was no clear victor. To give a broad idea of the weighting of pro-and-anti SH4 posts, whilst 33 of the posts on *SH4 Venting Area* were positive about the game, 34 were critical of it (the other 65 either off topic or not taking sides). On *I'm Disappointed and My Head Hurts* the split was 37/36. Although all the posters agreed as to the merits of *Silent Hill*, SH4 inspired opposing encampments of those for and against the new game.

This polarisation of criticisms and praise was founded on key elements that posters argued the new game either did, or did not, demonstrate. These were used to support individual readings of whether the game was an authentic representative of the series, and represent a range of moves to define individualised and often opposing versions of an ideal *Silent Hill*.

One move can be seen in the following post from *I'm Disappointed and my Head Hurts*:

Oh I don't think Dark is being a whiney lil bitch at all. Infact he's right on in this case. I'm sorry, but SH is SUPPOSED to be in SH. Not Subway world, not forrest world, not water prison world, not let's all gather around a hospital and masterbate world. All of these things have had their place in silent hill and that's what made them so creepy. To the classic brookhaven hospital, to the school of the damned (where any SH fan forgives the blocky graphics of game one and gets involved again) to Blue Creek apartments, and to my new personal favourite, the Chapel of god (ala SH3) [...] (Valtiel, 10 Sept 2004, 3.00pm)

This definition of what *Silent Hill* is "SUPPOSED" to be, evaluates SH4 against a fixed, ideal-version of *Silent Hill*, defined as tied to a specific location, the town of Silent Hill (rather than the worlds, or levels of SH4). The aesthetic development of the series away from "the blocky graphics of game one" (SH1) is referenced in the post, but more important is an idea of essential sameness; this means that a technically more primitive text such as SH1 can be deemed an authentic *Silent Hill* title. The contextualisation of "classic" locations within a larger binding environment (the town), is here attributed with imbuing the previous games with their sentimental import (that's what made them

⁷⁷ These two threads were lost in the 'forum flush' described in Chapter 3 – the post counts are from the time of archiving.

so “creepy”). The post recalls previous (personal) game experience(s) but also moves to establish a potential alliance (predicting the response of “any SH fan”). This potential alliance is realised when another poster agrees: “Valtiel had it right on, Silent Hill is supposed to be Silent Hill” (Darkmage, 10 Sept 2004, 8:18pm).

Another post in the thread offers a different, albeit related, fixing:

I just started playing this yesterday (for about 2 hours) and didn't get hooked up at all. I must say the game plays in a VERY different manner to previous games. The controls and weapons are similar but the way you fight, the enemies, etc. has changed. Although SH3 was a bit disappointing to me it still played quite a bit like the previous ones, apart from lack of the town it kept the same feel. It's much more action oriented now and you have to walk through big areas without much to do. Also it's level based so you don't get the 'town feel'. [...] I'll keep playing it hoping it gets better, but so far I'm not thrilled about it. (HeadlessPuppy, 10 Sept 2004, 5:57pm)

This post presents a desire to re-experience the “town-feel,” an atmosphere which is related to a specific style of gameplay – an exploratory mode of action (“It’s much more action⁷⁸ oriented now...”) - rather than specific locations. This emphasis is echoed by another poster in a different thread;

I realized that what I really miss isn't the town itself (despite how cool it was), but instead, I miss the freedom to explore. They could put it in Alaska for all I care as long as I can explore the town it takes place in, instead of being cramped up everywhere I go. (KLGChaos, *Big Disagreements People*, 3 Oct 2004, 01:27am)

This privileging of gameplay style rather than location means that SH3 - which is presented as being different from SH1 and SH2 (without the emphasis on the town) - is still presented as providing an authentic *Silent Hill* ‘feel.’

Each of these two posts expresses a longing for an idealized continuity of *Silent Hill* experience. In the first post, this involves a universe founded within the fictional town of Silent Hill. In the second, it relates to a specific type of gaming experience. Despite their differences in emphasis, I want to argue that each of these posts demonstrates a synchronising move. In each, the poster defines what *Silent Hill* is/should be (and in the case of SH4, is not). In doing so they mark out the desire to return to an established, fixed, game universe. Recontextualising Bakhtin, this universe can be considered in terms of the time-space relations of the *chronotope* (Bakhtin, 1981). This synchronising considers the chronotope “as if it were frozen in time” (Chandler, 2002, 12); against this, the changes of SH4 are regarded as alien and corrupting.

⁷⁸ Here I take “action” to refer to the increased amount of fighting/fending off enemies in SH4 than in the previous titles.

Positive posts from the thread demonstrate how the game is received in ways which move beyond the desire for sameness and favour the development of the series:

I think some of you should really take the time to think about: What if the series never changed? We would get the same game with a few new ideas. I for one do not want that. I don't think I would like the whole process of new game, same place, over and over again, Do you guys really hate innovation? We must wean ourselves sometimes, and I think some of us want to just have Silent Hill stay the same story and everything the same. [...] (Henry1, 10 Sept 2004, 11:31pm)

This post rejects the idea of endless duplicate *Silent Hill* texts as an ideal, instead arguing that the series must evolve in order to maintain its quality. The reference to “weaning” proposes that the fans as well as the text need to develop – presenting a model of progression of both object and fanbase. The post also makes reference to the divisions within the site inspired by the game (“some of you” and “you guys”), with the poster positioning themselves in opposition to those who criticise SH4.

Another poster continues the defence of SH4, but takes a different approach:

...The point is was silent hill 4 a fun experience to play? I love the new controls. Its fun to charge up a swing with the rusty axe. The story was good and it gave some fresh new perspective. That should be the common ground instead of whining about “It doesn't take place in silent hill” or something dumb like “henry runs bad”. I have a goofy run byt who cares. That's palcing emphadid on something that isn't that important to begin with. (Kitano20, 19 Sept 2004, 9:45am)

In contrast to the evolutionary model suggested in the previous post, here we have a separation of the text from its predecessors in terms of reception: considering the game on its own terms and praising the unique elements and “new perspective” that it offers. The post continues the oppositional positioning, condemning SH4's critics as “whining,” and focusing on “something dumb.” This post, like the previous one, celebrates the development of the series, whilst privileging elements that are important (the game should be innovative/should be fun).

I want here to point at a distinction between the desire for a fixed versus dynamic object. The first involves a desire to return to a fixed textual universe, either to repeat the same experience or a return to the universe to explore it. In this context, change to the universe (or the way that the universe is experienced) provides disappointment. The second contradicts these desires, celebrating the development of the object. I am going to refer to the opposition between the fixed and dynamic in more technical terms as a distinction between *synchronic* and *diachronic* modes of nostalgia. In doing so – as in my use of the analytical distinction between competence/performance in Chapter 2 - I am not suggesting that these are essential or stable modes, rather that:

we might usefully differentiate between categories of text in pointing at the different strategies that they foreground (or, rather, that we might foreground in their analysis) (Dowling, 2005a).

This then involves a distinction between stances that value the reworking of the game, and stances that value an ideal version of *Silent Hill* which the fan/poster wishes to return to.

In addition to the synchronic/diachronic opposition, there is another distinction that can be made. This involves the authorship, or *comportment* that is privileged. The quotes referenced above for example, include references to both the agency of the producers (Konami) and to the gameplayers (the fans as ‘agents’ within the game-worlds). In each of the positive posts, we also see respect for, and to some extent the celebration of, external authorship (either to the site and/or the post). This contrasts with the criticism of artistic choices in the two negative posts. In terms of comportment, we can therefore consider an *internal/external* opposition (in relation to the fan).

Each of these oppositions — between the diachronic and synchronic chronotope (that which is established as being desired), and between the internal and external comportment (mode of experience and/or authorship of this chronotope) — are summarized in Fig. 7.1; this provides four modes of nostalgia:

Chronotope	Comportment	
	External	Internal
Synchronic	Repeat	Explore
Diachronic	Spectate	Mod

Fig. 7.1: Modes of Nostalgia

The *explore* mode here involves a form of synchronic nostalgia in which the fan desires a fixed universe, but one that can be investigated further through the fan’s agency. In contrast, the *repeat* mode stands for a form of nostalgia in which there is the impossible desire to re-experience an edenic experience. In contrast, the *mod* mode involves some transformation of the textual universe by the fan author, and the *spectate* mode, the

transformation or development of the universe by author other than the fan (Team Silent,* for example). The posts that I have introduced here serve as examples of positions within synchronic (the negative posts) and the diachronic (the positive posts which emphasise the spectate mode). While it is somewhat ambiguous as to which of the two synchronic modes the two negative posts would represent, it is of course possible for a post to exhibit more than one mode.

The value of the opening out of nostalgia in this way is in being able to distinguish between the essentialising/abstracting moves within positing activity. For example, the conflict between the repeat/return and spectate modes in the arguments between the anti- and pro-SH4 encampments. The schema also reveals (relative) absences within the data; for example the paucity of examples of the mod 'mode' in the threads from SHH that I have looked at. Attitudes towards the mod mode on the SH4 forum can be seen in the following exchange:

Quote: On a seprate note, to anyone who might give a damn. I am intent on finshing my SH fan fic this time. [...] Main character survives but has to live as a dark wizard for eternity.....you will find out what that means eventually.

You're right I don't give a damn. All of the Fanfics I've read suck Donkey Balls and are far less Imaginative than anything Konami would ever produce (Including my own #).....So I doubt I will think yours is any better. Sorry for the rude comments I was just thinking outloud with my fingers. (Loveless_Dogg, 12 Oct 2004, 1:33am)

Here the budding fanfic author is rejected, with the mod mode⁷⁹ marked out as non-legitimate (“All of the Fanfics I’ve read suck Donkey Balls”).⁸⁰

It may seem odd to describe a desire for change - a privileging of the diachronic - as nostalgic. Nostalgia is conventionally regarded in terms of retrospection rather than as involving forward momentum or a longing for transformation. However in my extension of the concept, each of the cross-products in the schema represents the utterance of a nostalgic 'desire' because each involves something which draws the fan back to the origin (to this object, rather than another). In order to establish an object of fandom, the dynamic has to be fixed - has to contain some sameness - or the attention would not be maintained, the allegiance would not be held.

⁷⁹ A further distinction may be made in relation to authorship of fanfiction however, with work potentially closer to the explore mode if faithful to the text.

⁸⁰ It is worth noting that discussion of fanfiction is evident on the more general SHH boards which have not been my focus; this reflects the site's organization by topic and content.

Examining the elements of the fan object which are endorsed as providing this anchoring in the discussion of the *Silent Hill* and Whedonverse texts, enables consideration of the points that are collectively presented as fixing allegiance. These serve as quilting points for the establishment of the identity of these objects; as noted in Chapter 5, this fixing is only temporary. John Fiske makes a similar point in *Television Culture* in relation to the production of readings of television by audiences;

[...] points of stability and anchored meanings (however temporary) are to be found not in the text itself, but in its reading by a socially and historically situated viewer. Such a meaning is, of course, not fixed in a universal, empirical 'reality,' but in the social situation of the viewer. Different readings may stabilize texts differently and momentarily, but they do achieve moments of stability, moments of meaning. (Fiske, 1991, 117)

In these terms my interest here is in looking at readings of the fan object as configured within social (and political) moves within the site, and how certain quilting points are attributed particular significance within these settings. As suggested above, it is possible to examine these quilting points through the identification of the features that are prioritized by the gamers on SHH as the core attributes of a 'proper' *Silent Hill* game. These include example, gameplay, story, atmosphere, and – significantly - place. The influence of the latter is perhaps unsurprising for a series which takes its title from a fictional town.

MODES OF NOSTALGIA ON COA: ANGEL.

In moving across settings, we can see how modes of nostalgia take shape on the COA forums. The posting activity from COA that I am examining here is not focused on a central point of interest such as SH4 – but drawn instead from discussion of *Angel* in the run up to, and aftermath, of the final episode of the series. Examples of a range of activities which privilege differing modes of nostalgia can be found within this data – from the interrogation and analysis of texts (explore), re-watching DVD collections to re-live experiences (repeat), watching and celebrating textual development and new episodes (spectate), and fanfiction writing (which may represent the mod mode).

Moves to express the 'essence' of *Angel* are apparent when the fans work to establish the distinction between *Angel* and *BtVS*. The essentialising in these posts is not always consistent, as three posts from the thread *Buffy or Angel Where Does Your Allegiance Lie?* demonstrate:

I really love both shows equally, but sometimes I'm just not really in the "Angel" mood. [...] On BtVS, even when things are the most grim...they are still lighthearted. (which is why I guess some people think the show is annoying) They still manage to have normal lives and have fun sometimes. On Angel, it seems that everyone has sacrificed their whole lives and in the end their life! (Spuffyforever, 27 April 2005, 12:59 am)

I'm the exact opposite of SPuffy. I think that the lighthearted ness in Buffy is just immature, unnecessary and unrealistic. Not needed. Too childish. I'll take an apocalypse over Buffy's stupid cookie speeches anyway. (Oni_Tenshi_Rune, 01 May 2005, 3:39 am)

Lightheartedness is not the same as immaturity. And unrealistic shouldn't be an issue in judging shows about vampires. I prefer Buffy to Angel. They're about equal on first viewing, but for me Angel has less rewatchability. I've been able to watch Buffy episodes several times, but Angel episodes tend to lose my interest after I've seen them a couple times." (Revolver, 03 May 2005, 12:51 am)

Here we see the marking out of difference between *Angel* and *BtVS* via reference to general principles about each of the shows – the lightheartedness of *BtVS* in contrast to the darkness of *Angel*, the rewatchability of *BtVS*. This positioning also involves the making of value judgements about the text in terms of the relative value of "lightheartedness."

The marking of distinctions sees fans referring back to the series heritage;

The shows are just different for me. Maybe I like Buffy a little better cause I've been there from day 1- through the babyfat days and all! (I have to admit I boycotted Angel for the very first week because I was so mad about the new show, but I gave in pretty quickly). I don't think I could pick a real favorite because to me they are threads in the same story. (Angie, *Buffy or Angel?* 12 March 2004, 07:54am)

The characters on Angel were so deep and different, they all had their own backstories and somehow they all felt a lot more realistic than the ones on BTVS. [...] the show matured better than BTVS did. Cordy kept the show together so well in the time she was there, I loved watching her change from Queen C to who she finally became, but she never lost some parts of her personality, like some of the characters on BTVS did [...] (eunsoma, *ATS vs BTVS which was the better product?* 6 Dec 2005, 12:43pm)

These posts emphasise movement, development, transformation and "becoming" over time; development which is tied to personal experience. The emphasis on the diachronic and externally authored chronotope – seen in phrases such as "the show matured," "been there since day one," "watching her change" – reflects the difference between *Angel's* and *Silent Hill's* seriality discussed in Chapter 3. Here characters in the series have established "histories" over numerous episodes and story arcs. Here the externally authored diachronic text is valued, rather than the desire to return/repeat.

In these posts we see an emphasis on the spectate mode. At the same time, changes which mark diachronic progression are presented as destabilising. This can be seen in a criticism of Season 5:

I just can't help but feel like I'm watching a crappy courtroom show with monsters in the mix. The whole angel magic is gone! Just the day before I saw a re-run of Season 1's third episode In The Dark. What a world of difference! The atmosphere, the mood, the acting (doyle quinn, bless his soul!)⁸¹ (haplo *What the hell happened to season 5*, 5 November 2005, 11:06)

Here, in contrast to the previous posts, we find a reference back to a (perceived) golden age⁸² – the distance between the first and the fifth season highlighted by re-runs. The reference to re-watching displays a return mode of nostalgia which might inspire repeated revisits.

The cancellation of *Angel*, and screening of the final episode, marked the end of *Angel*'s primary textual development. Shortly after this point, as discussed in Chapter 3, COA's new *Hyperion* forums emerged. These marked a formal extension of the external diachronic which was carried into the design of the site by the introduction of forums specifically devoted to discussion of *Firefly*, as well as *Angel* and *BtVS*. The binding element here was Joss Whedon as auteur. This expansion was in some ways natural, as discussion of *BtVS* had already been incorporated into the posting activity on the site. Increasing attention, however, was now paid to the new upcoming release of a new Joss Whedon created text, the film *Serenity*.

In the light of the finale of *Angel* and the closure this represented, discussion focused on *Angel* as a synchronic, 'completed' text. In response to a criticism of the redundancy/stupidity of a discussion relating to the size of Sunnydale, one poster commented:

Anyway. We know it isnt real we are not stupid. But what else are we suppose to talk about? Not like their are new episodes. And when shows end, and us the fans get bored, we come to chatty rooms to nitpick. (Berto, *How big was Sunnydale*, 26 Feb 2005, 05:11am)

These "nitpicking" interactions demonstrate a more unified display of nostalgia than that seen on the SH4 forum.

⁸¹ Glenn Quinn played Doyle in Season 1 of *Angel*, the actor died in 2002.

⁸² This echoes the discussion of the (negative) development of the COA forums described in Chapter 6.

Responses to the question *Whats The Funniest Moment in Angel* for example, present *Angel* as a synchronised object, with posters sharing their recollections of the most memorable scenes from the series:

I think their lookin at the wee little puppet man" - Spike, "Smile Time" S5
Pretty much the whole Spike giggling and wrestling the Angel Puppet.....
First time I saw it I fell out of the chair.....literally.....I laughed so hard I had tears streaming down my face.....
And also.... "I bloody well invented afraid of the dark - Spike, S5 (Bebop, 18 Apr 2005, 10:47pm)

1. Angel singing
2. Wesley
3. Cordy/Gunn scenes
4. Caveman/Astronaut
5. Angel dancing (Lindseyis#1, 24 April 2005, 4:38pm)

This exchange does not see posters attempting to enforce their opinions on others, but swapping collections of favourite moments from *Angel*; *Angel* is here configured as a synchronised object and repository of ‘moments.’ This synchronising/referencing is similar to the discussion of COA in the run up to the closure of the forums discussed in Chapter 6, and serves as a similar unifying strategy.

As well as the general openness to the diachronic nature of seriality on COA (which can be contrasted with criticisms of SH4’s changes on SHH), a more welcoming and supportive attitude to the mod mode is also visible on COA than on SHH. Only 7 of the 265 threads that I sampled from February to May 2004 involve the posting of fanfics. In contrast to SHH, the response to these fictions was positive. This can be illustrated in two responses to a fanfic which speculated the ending of the series by Michelle (*Final Episode*, 01 April 2004, 18:30):

Thank you for taking the time to share your little piece of fiction with us all. (icat, 1 April 2004, 19:29pm)

I thought it was very creative, thank you for sharing that with us. (Lusty, 1 April 2004, 21:09pm)

These posts demonstrate the acceptability of the mod mode alongside discussion of the primary texts; this can be contrasted to the separation of internally/externally authored texts on SHH.

On both COA and SHH, posters work to define their fan objects via the construction of an ideal, essentialised text. These moves can be explored via the range of modes of

nostalgia that are demonstrated on each site. Whilst examples of the four modes that I have introduced are visible on both COA and SHH, the patterning of this modality differs across the settings. On SHH, the conflict between pro- and anti-SH4 can be seen as generated by the opposition between those endorsing explore/return modes, in contrast to spectate modes. On COA there is greater consistency of similar positions being marked out in relation to each of the modes. Here then, we can see how the analysis begins to mark out discontinuities between the sites. Having begun to consider the dynamic ways in which fans work to establish their fan objects on the forums, I now want to examine fans' responses to the identification of unwanted developments or apparent discrepancies within the texts.

7.4 MODES OF IDENTIFICATION

Rather than the explicit macro-level negotiation of what the texts 'should be,' my interest in this section is in how the identification with the object is maintained and challenged. The section will present an analytical schema for examining these moves, drawing from data from both SHH and COA. This schema will be recruited in conjunction with the nostalgia schema, in the analysis of discussion of the *Silent Hill* film and *Serenity* in Section 7.5.

MODES OF IDENTIFICATION ON SHH AND COA

One of the threads introduced in the previous section - "I'm disappointed and my head hurts," contained a prolonged argument between two posters – xx237xx and OverDose Delusion - who privileged different modes of nostalgia. xx237xx, a supporter of the game, privileged the external/diachronic spectate mode. OverDose Delusion, a vehement critic of the game, moved within the explore/repeat modes, privileging a synchronic chronotope. As well as these moves, their exchanges also contained a back-and-forth exchange of a range of criticisms/defences of SH4. Exploring these enables me to begin to open out a consideration of the variety of modes of identification on SHH.

The argument was initiated by OverDose Delusion's post: *10 things I hate about the Room*, which contained the following complaint:

[...] We are supposed to empathize with this character who can't escape his supernaturally sealed apartment....fine....yet he can't even shoot out a window or yell through a hole in his neighbor's wall? Okay sure, I'm sure the windows are bullet-proof and Henry's voice wouldn't make it through the wall to Eileen's apartment. This is a minor complaint on my part, but it's merely the feather that broke the camel's (or the franchise's) back. And another thing, the ghosts that appear later on in the apartment are extra cheap. The main place where your health could be recovered is now just another opportunity for the game to take another cheapshot at your health gauge. And it's my understanding that it's even worse if you accept the shabby doll....which I fortunately sidestepped, courtesy of Gamefaqs. Thanks a lot Konami. (OverDose Delusion, 11 Sept2004, 7:31am)

In this post OverDose Delusion introduces a number of criticisms of SH4 which address different targets. The first criticism is the complaint that Henry does not call for help or smash one of the windows that he (and the gameplayer) is able to look out of at certain points of the game. This involves an apparent yearning for 'realism,' the absence of which is interpreted as highlighting the artifice of the game experience. The latter comments, in contrast, relate to the gameplay/design of the game; the quality of the game in terms of the "extra cheap" ghosts and the aggravating organisation of game saves.⁸³

xx237xx's response to this post addresses these criticisms directly:

You seem to be angry at the game for not allowing you to escape the room. Well, that isn't the point of the game. The point of the game is to be trapped. Your complaining about this is like someone saying, "Why can't I just use a machine gun to shoot the Goombas in [Super] Mario? It's stupid to jump on them." The point of the game isn't to shoot the Goombas, it's to stomp on them. Stop complaining about things that were never meant to be in the game in the first place. [...] As for not yelling through the wall to Eileen, I think at that point Henry probably realizes that it's pointless. (xx237xx, 12 September 2004, 5:09 pm)

This extract contains two defensive moves – First "the rules of the game" are recruited - xx237xx demonstrating an approach to *SH4* that adheres to the game as a constructed text ("The point of the game is to be trapped"). xx237xx then moves from this focus on textual logic to the logic of the fictional universe, speaking of the characters as 'real' and justifying the text in this context. Here, then, we see an attempt to defend the text by making reference to both the logic of the medium (it's a game) and the logic of the fictional "world" (Henry 'probably' realising "that it's pointless").

OverDose Delusion and xx237xx are here discussing the relationship between the 'actual' text (*SH4* as constituted in their readings) and an 'ideal' text (what the game should be). They are constructing opposing arguments about the nature of this

⁸³ Which prove even more antagonising by the fact that picking up the "shabby doll" makes 'life' much more difficult to sustain.

relationship, recruiting a range of references to support these. OverDose Delusion uses an idealised notion of ‘realism’ and ‘quality’ to reveal the inadequacy of the SH4 which leads to their disenchantment with it. xx237xx is able to align their conceptualisation of what the game should be with what the game is by first making reference to a different schema (the rules of the game - “the point of the game is to be trapped”) to support this defence of SH4, and then explaining the lack of action within the logic of the text. Indeed, OverDose Delusion pre-empts potential moves to explain away their criticisms by sarcastically making reference to a possible ‘rational’ explanation (in relation to the logic of the game universe); “Okay, sure, I’m sure the windows are bullet-proof and Henry’s voice wouldn’t make it through the wall to Eileen’s apartment.”

A distinction can be made here between what I am going to refer to as *suturing* and *rupturing* moves. These terms refer respectively to strategic actions which secure and draw together the actual and ideal, and those which mark a break between them. In these terms, OverDose Delusion is suggesting a rupturing of the actual/ideal relationship by introducing two disjunctures – lack of realism, and lack of quality. In contrast, xx237xx, is re-establishing (suturing) the ‘fit’ between the actual and ideal via reference to the rules of the game, and a different ‘rational’ explanation pertaining to the narrative text.

A second key distinction can also be introduced here, between the ‘power’ of the rupturing/suturing moves. This can be thought of in terms of the ‘power’ of a zoom lens; pertaining to the localising/generalising strategies demonstrated in relation to the referent(s) which are recruited in putting forward a suturing or rupturing move. For example, in OverDose Delusion’s post: the local instance and impact of the ‘shabby doll’ and reference to the ghosts, versus the general conceptualisation of a lack of ‘realism’ and an idea of ‘quality.’ In xx237xx’s post we see similar delimiting/expanding moves; the reference to the “Goombas” as providing a localised instance of discontinuity in a different text, in contrast to the generalised conception of what the game “is about.” The recruitment of such references establishes the strength of the suturing/rupturing moves.

These distinctions – suture/rupture and local/general are represented in Fig. 7.2:

Power		
Move	Local	General
Suture	Involve	Reside
Rupture	Estrange	Alienate

Fig. 7.2: Suturing & Rupturing

The terms introduced in Fig. 7.2 have emerged from my engagement with data from two contexts where the main focus has been discussion of media texts with serially established fictional universes. This is clearly reflected in the use of terms such as “reside” for suturing moves that position within a general (fictional) referent; a term which signifies some idea of an inhabitable space. The use of these terms in relation to other contexts and frames of reference (in relation to generalised understandings of fashion for example) may provoke interesting and potentially productive dissonances.

My use of the term identification earlier in this chapter, and introduction here of “alienation” needs some clarification; this is particularly the case as each has been an influential concept in the discussion of audience/text relationship in film theory (and elsewhere).⁸⁴ In writing on film spectatorship, the concepts of alienation and identification have frequently been cast in opposition. In a discussion of critical responses to the film *The Accused*, Smith (1995), for example, describes the tendency of some film criticism to represent:

[...] our responses to characters in terms of a singular ‘identification’, along with the assumption that this can only be disrupted by an equally wholesale ‘alienation’ or ‘distanciation’[...] (Smith, 1995, 6)

John Fiske (1987) establishes a similar distinction between close and distanced positions in his discussion of the difference between realist and discursive reading

⁸⁴ Suturing also has an established theoretical antecedent in film theory particularly in the work of Stephen Heath (1981) – my own use of the term differs from Heath’s psychoanalytic model in that I am using the term to refer to the strategic drawing together of ideal and actual, rather than the formation of subject positions.

strategies. He suggests a distinction between “psychological identification,” “implication,” and “ideological identification” in an attempt to move away from a blanket use of the term “identification.” Fiske proposes that realist strategies blur the representation and the real, inviting psychological readings of characters and supporting identification, and that discursive strategies discourage identification and can be seen to be tied to the idea of Brechtian “critical alienation” (a resonance my use of this term does not intend). Each is underpinned by different ideologies and activated by the active viewer who may or may not be willing to submit (to some degree) to the text (Fiske, 1987, 154). Fiske is explicit that this viewer can do both (or either), but these still provide a polarised distinction between either being ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ of the text.

My focus is somewhat different. By examining the moves being marked out on the forums and the referents that are recruited, I move beyond a duality of possible positions (either ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the text). Different suturing/rupturing moves, as can be seen in the posts introduced above, are clearly possible in respect of the same references. In these examples, the establishing of different principles (e.g. ‘textual logic’, ‘realism’) can be identified. These provide the frames of reference from which the relationship between actual and ideal are brought together/or separated – this is dependent upon where the poster places their emphasis. These moves are also related to the formation of community relationships. Suturing moves (recruiting local and general targets) in this context might be seen to be stabilising, whereas the rupturing moves (introducing a disjunction) might be regarded as destabilising (within the setting in relation to the possession of the fan object). The regularity of certain moves/referents within the sites which serve to form alliances, are thus involved in the dynamic establishing of the identity of these sites.

Whilst these suturing/rupturing moves relate to positions taken in respect of the object, they also tie into the formation, and maintenance, of what I will refer to as *earnest* and *sceptical* modes of identification. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, these terms resonate with Goffman’s distinction between the ‘sincere’ and ‘cynical’ belief of the performer in “his own act” (Goffman, 1959, 28). Goffman’s distinction appears to rest on a conceptualisation of intentionality, rather than explicit cynicism or sincerity. In his terms, the cynical belief involves a discrepancy between the true feeling of the performer and his performance, whereas the sincere belief involves a unity, a ‘truth’ (in

terms of the relationship between belief and performance). In this configuration of social interaction, the intention of the performer is unavailable to the audience, the cynicism is not uttered but held secret by the performer who can, if he desires; “toy at will with something his audience must take seriously” (Goffman, 1959, 29). Instead of the essentialising of agency (within the individual as actor/authentic source) that this model suggests, my focus is the relationship between the (performed) fan identity and the object in terms of identification. Earnest/sceptical identifications can therefore be seen to be marked out and challenged in the posting activity through varying suturing/rupturing moves.

By identification then, I mean the stance the poster takes in respect of the object; where they position their allegiance. In thinking about the mechanisms to which the rupture is attributed, it might be argued that at a higher level of analysis, sceptical identification involves the poster being ‘earnest’ in relation to something else (another object perhaps). At an even higher level of course, everyone taking part on the site is earnest – the ultimate sceptical stance would involve a rejection of the text, or a member ending their involvement with the site.

The higher-level earnest suturing that rupturing moves represent is illustrated in Fig. 7.3:

Move	Power	
	Local	General
Suture (1)	Involve	Reside
Rupture	Estrange	Alienate
Suture (2)	Involve	Reside

Fig. 7.3: Suturing and Rupturing Identification

In the case of OverDose Delusions post, the poster's criticism of the lack of realism in the game might lead us to regard them as being earnest in respect of the real world, and that this earnest identification might inspire (or even, to use a dangerous term, be presented as 'motivating') a sceptical identification with *SH4*. In contrast, xx237xx would be seen to stand as sceptical in relation to the real world, identifying with the game universe as presented in the text.

Moving between the sites we can see how these strategies are evident in respect of different objects. Similar positioning, for example, is evident in discussion of *BtVS* on *COA*. One poster questions a moment in the final episode of Season Three of the series:

I was watching "Graduation part 2" and it came to the part when Angel had to drink Buffy's blood to cure the poison from Faith. It seemed like he was just havin at it when he was drinking her, but in season one the Master drank Buffy for like 2 seconds and she was supposedly dead. I'm not gonna go through all the examples and time differences from each vampire attack through out the shows, but is it all just out of convenience or what's the deal with how long it takes avampire to drain someone?. (Moment of Happiness, 25 Mar 2005, 12:24am)

This poster is making reference to discrepancies between the events in the general *Buffy* universe as well as to scenes/time-differences in screened material. This can be read in terms of alienation (marking a discrepancy between the events in the fictional universe) and estrangement (a local example of inconsistency in the screened material). Although the series is not being evaluated (as being "bad"), it is being questioned; the text does not make 'sense' because of the contradictions it contains.

The responses to this post offer examples of differing suturing moves, similar to those discussed in the context of *SH4* and Henry's failure to shout for help. The following post attempts to address this discrepancy by making reference to the working of the series as a text, as logic which removes these inconsistencies:

I figure that Angel took longer to drain Buffy because it was supposed to be...well, sexy, metaphory goodness. They couldn't be together in the biblical sense, so this was the closest as anyone was going to get to a sex scene between them. (Musette, 25 Mar 2005, 8:02am)

This post addresses the discrepancy by general referents both referring to what the scene does on its own terms, a general understanding of what the workings of the tv-text needs to produce in terms of audience pleasure, and an understanding of why, in the fiction, Angel and Buffy cannot be together. Despite referring to different frameworks (the television fiction, an idea of television production), each is an example of

residence. This move is supported in a post which refers wholly to the fictional universe:

Well, The Master is the 'master', so maybe he has the ability to drain more blood quicker. Also, Buffy died (or flat lined) from the pool of water he dropped her in, which caused her to drown. (Wolverine26, 25 Mar 2005, 6:30am)

In contrast to 'Im Disappointed and my head hurts' (where conflict stems from the failure of xx237xx to satisfy OverDose Delusion's sceptical criticisms with attempts at earnest suturing), here a sceptical move is satisfied by earnest responses (which recruit different targets) and are deemed to provide a satisfying resolution of these criticisms.

Differing suturing moves can also be seen in discussion of *Harms Way*, an episode of *Angel* that provoked some criticism. This episode focused on a secondary character, Harmony, a former high-school girl from Sunnydale-turned-vampire, who was ultimately - and this was not known at the time - going to betray those she now worked with at the end of *Angel*. One poster, complaining about the episode, asked:

Why make an entire ep about Harmony? She is an OK supplementary character but that's it... also, why is Harmony Angels' secretary? Has it been explained. (Alan Partridge, *Last nights Uk ep Harms way awful*, 10 March 2004, 08:36)

This opening criticism of the episode is supported by 2 other posters (in 3 posts). 11 posters (in 12 posts) defended the episode using a variety of earnest suturing moves, using different referents as demonstrated in the following post:

as far as why she's Angel's secretary, there was one line in the season opener about Angel having a familiar face around, or something similar. Not only that, but I'm guessing that Harmony was the only person that they had to choose from that they actually knew, and knew was relatively harmless. (Vlad, 10 March 2004, 08:58am)

This post contains both local and general references – evidence that supports the episode from dialogue in the “season opener” (involve) and speculation relating to the logic of the characters (reside). These reinforce the suturing move at different levels.

There are examples of unhappiness on the COA forums, often relating to elements of the fiction at the level of character and character pairing (specifically conflicting shipper interests). These introduce a distinction between sentimental and logical “wrongness” within the series. Compare two posts from the thread *100 ep[isode]s 100 memories to forget*:

“I HATE Angel and Cordy as a couple” (Megan, 10 Mar 2004, 4:22)

“The whole Conner/Cordy thing- gross” (Angels, 10 Mar 2004 09:24)

with

Out of all, I would have to say the Connor/Cordy thing was wrong. She was like his mom, and stuff. Ok, not biologically, but still. The kid was already messed up enough, the last thing he needed was an Oedipus complex. (The Vampyre Quirinus, 10 March 2004, 15:48pm)

Whilst the first posts personalise and sentimentalise the dislike for this pairing, The Vampyre Quirinus's post makes reference to the logic of the text, which is treated as real (working within the text). Here we do not find a defence of the text but a focus on its unwanted elements which go against (these) posters' desires.

Such unhappiness is often dealt with in deference to Joss Whedon – who provides one of the central suturing referents recruited on COA. This can be seen in responses to a spoiler revealing the news of Wesley's death in the thread *In Joss We Trust*. Here one member describes their response to the news:

Wesley is my favourite character. I am EXTREMELY upset at the news of his demise. Remember how people felt when Leo died in Titanic? I feel like that, well, if Titanic had been 5 years long instead of 3 hours. You know? (Sarah, 18 Apr 2004, 1:11am)

Wesley is here presented as central to Sarah's prolonged affiliation to *Angel*; the poster goes on to threaten; "I won't watch the show without him. That's a promise. But that's just me." (18 April 2004, 11:18). However, whilst presenting rupturing moves relating to the importance of Wesley to *Angel*, and voicing anger and anxiety about Wesley's death, Sarah keeps re-asserting the belief in Joss; "I still love Joss, I'm just VERY sad that my poor Wesley's gonna bite the dust." At this point of potential fissure we see a look to a higher power. The responses to this post demonstrate a synchronic construction of Joss as stabilising anchor. Ascha, for example, notes:

Ultimately, It's Joss's show and he will do what he feels is right. I remember being horrified when Doyle died and I couldn't see how just Angel and Cordelia could run with the show. [...] I believe that Joss will do the best thing. (Ascha, 18 Apr 2004, 07:59am)

The rupture caused by this death is here re-sutured via reference to a conceptualisation of Joss Whedon as all-knowing auteur, who provides an influential quilting point for allegiance to the text. In the next chapter I will examine the response of posters to criticisms of Whedon by a few (isolated) fans on the site, and explore the closing down of sceptical stances on the COA forums in relation to discussion of *Serenity*.

7.5 THE DISCUSSION OF TWO SECONDARY TEXTS

In this section I want to draw from the language introduced so far in the chapter to explore discussion of the *Silent Hill Movie* and the film version of *Firefly, Serenity*.

THE SILENT HILL FILM

In early 2004, before any of the marketing or footage from the *Silent Hill* film was released, the members of SHH were toying with the idea of a film version of the series. The film at this point remained an open, as yet unauthored, text, one imbued with significance by virtue of their investment in the series. Discussion of the film included the expression of anxieties, predictions, and hopes rooted in synchronising moves relating to the nature of *Silent Hill*, and suggestions of what would be acceptable in a *Silent Hill* (film) text. This included some explicitly nostalgic reminiscence of the *Silent Hill* games, and identification of key scenes/elements that posters would like translated into film:

I love the scene in Silent Hill 1, the cinematic when he's in the school (hell school) and the phone rings and his daughter is on the other line and it's all fuzzy, it always sent a chill down my spine. (Harry Sutherland, *Specific Scene You Would Like to See in the Movie*, 5 Nov 2005, 4:14am)

Discussion of the film also contained the identification of numerous points of potential alienation, with members of SHH pre-empting the possible harm that the filmmakers might enact on the series. In threads such as *Would You Walk Out?* and *What DON'T you want to be in the movie* posters suggested scenes that would not 'make sense' because they would go against the logic of the fiction:

[...] If I see too many things done seriously wrong, such as, oh, I don't know, a nine foot Pyramid Head duking it out with Rose and Harry, I will walk out. Noisily. (Drewfus - Posted: Fri 01 Jul, 2005 4:03am)

Id burn the Screen if they screw up the greatness of Silent Hill. For example of them screqing it up, if Robbie the Rabbit was the God. (Sagitar Bloodwing, 11 Jul 2005, 3:52am)

Others suggest moments that would go against the general ethos of "*Silent Hill*"

I'll tell ya, if I see any Matrix-style fighting or any bumbling SWAT teams that dont even belong, I would be really pissed. (Vagrant, 30 Jun 2005, 8:46pm)

[...] Hmmm... I'd walk out if they totally "Politically Correctify" the plot and characters. (nightshadow_taffer, 4 Jul 2005, 6:11am)

Such discussion involves the negotiation of that which is the ‘beyond the pale’; elements that posters regard as being impossible for the text to accommodate. Such moments were presented in the posting activity as an accumulation of estranging/alienating elements. These moments are presented as potential *anti-quilting points*; producing the rupturing between the actual and ideal, and resulting in the rejection of the film. These potential fissures are therefore presented as virtual tipping points towards a sceptical identification with the film, points which are identified from an earnest identification with a synchronised *Silent Hill*.

As the release date approached, an increasing amount of marketing and publicity material appeared on the site, including production stills, and the film’s trailer(s). As with the responses to SH4 discussed in Section 7.3, responses to this material involved the evaluation of verisimilitude with what had gone before, and the identification of points of mutation and contradiction. However, the SHM differed from SH4 as it involved a “transduction” of the *Silent Hill* experience across modes (Kress, 2003) - the film marking a move across different mediums (see chapter 9 for discussion of fans’ responses to this move). Many posters responded by separating the primary and secondary texts; suggesting that the film could work as a separate, but linked, entity:

I wouldn't mind a movie remake of one of the games but there is just a lot more that can go wrong that way. So a side story all on its own seems best. [...] (Cade, *Ack Scary*, 3 Jul 2005, 4:48pm)

The idea of things “going wrong” is again read from a synchronised conceptualisation of the chronotope – a desire for coherent texts with a consistency of logic. The possibility of a rupturing (via estrangement and alienation), remained an ongoing concern.

Such concern also involved anxiety about the impact of a cinematic adaptation of the series; the movement away from the original text, and how independent it had become (Chung, 2002, 18). Pre-release material was, for example, evaluated in respect of ideal synchronised *Silent Hill* referents - fans evaluating authenticity, and praising the producers’ attention to detail.⁸⁵ I suggested earlier that the town provided a strong quilting point for the series; the producers were to receive praise for their attention to the locations of the town:

⁸⁵ Although some contradictions were noted.

What an incredible amount of detail they put in! this is gonna be so good... and look! a bus route! Some of the shots there seemed to be in Bachman area, or it could be just the patrol car....is it cybil's car? Hmmm and Midwich! They're not that far from the school and hospital Oh man this is gonna be so creepy..... They even got the map of silent hill right with the lake..... im so excited.... [...] (vf-207, 8 May 2005, 1:23am)

A link to a fan-made video on the website youtube.com* enabled members to experience a direct comparison of gameplay and film footage. This video⁸⁶ - constructed from cut scenes, recorded game play footage from SH1 and SH2, and production stills and trailer footage from the film - enabled a consideration of the shifts the film marked (such as the gender of the main protagonist), and the merging of chronology of the series⁸⁷ which opened up potential fissures within the canon.

One key point of interest was whether Pyramid Head, a key *Silent Hill* monster, would be in the film. As a character in *SH2*, Pyramid Head has spawned contrasting theories. A wikipedia entry on the character provides a range of explanations about his origins. One central theory ties Pyramid Head to the character of James Sutherland (the protagonist of *SH2*), with wikipedia suggesting that: "The Pyramid Heads are created out of James' subconscious need for someone to punish him, and is in fact representative of James, himself."⁸⁸ The fans were aware that James Sutherland was probably not in the movie. Because of this, Pyramid Head's presence became potentially problematic in terms of the logic of the text; if he was tied in some ways to James, then he wouldn't exist on his own. Any interactions with Harry and Rose (characters from *SH1*) would therefore involve a discontinuity in the chronology of the canon, producing an alienating rupture. This was noted by the poster Goodnight:

Oh, and if the climax looks like being Harry vs. Pyramid Head, I'm also out. And demanding a refund. (Goodnight,)

Some posters, however, reacted differently, identifying with this possibility, as it would enable them to experience something that hadn't happened in the game:

Goodnight wrote: [...] Oh, and if the climax looks like being Harry vs. Pyramid Head, I'm also out. And demanding a refund.

⁸⁶Compare and Contrast video available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mg_HrO0eXs0&search=Silent%20Hill.

⁸⁷ Harry Mason searching for his daughter Cheryl (*SH1*) becomes Rose searching for her sick daughter Sharon, in a town inhabited by characters from *SH1* (Cybil Bennett, the policewoman in the video) and *SH2* (Pyramid Head).

⁸⁸This page has since been updated, and this citation is no longer on the entry for Pyramid Head.

The above in bold would officially make Silent Hill the BEST movie EVER. Suffice to say that if Pyramid Head appears anywhere in the movie, I will buy it on DVD. (Debrowski, 13 July 2005, 5:18am)

Here the earnest identification appears to be focused on Pyramid Head, who appears to be a key *Silent Hill* quilting point for this poster, and is prioritised over the canon logic of *Silent Hill*.

For the reasons presented above, the confirmation of the presence of a Red Pyramid on the set of the film by the screenwriter Roger Avery, incited controversy. The news inspired various reactions; the voicing of excitement, cynicism (focusing on the commercial reasons for the presence of PH in the film, as “a recognisable” part of the franchise), and anger: “Couldn’t they be a bit more original? Christ. Let’s assrape the series” (Ethos, *Latest news on movie*).

Aside from these positioning moves, attempts to resolve this potential fissure opened up by Pyramid Head’s role in the film were also evident. The following exchanges, from a thread specifically related to this news, sees posters taking different stances in respect of the Pyramid Head issue, its significance in relation to the value of the film/its creators, and the film’s relationship to the canon:

“it’ll be awesome to see him in the picture [PH] [...] but isn’t he James creation?” (66k7)

“Yes, so they could have screwed around with the Silent Hill mythology already. Unless James is in the film (unlikely).” (Icewater)

“Looks like Gans isn’t as big of a Silent Hill fanboy as Avery said he was” (Sefiros)

“I don’t care if they screw around with the mythology. The games are canon. The movie isn’t. I’m just hoping it’s an entertaining film. Pyramid Head is the most badass monster to grace a video game and son to be a movie.” (Orestes)

“Oh Shit! This movie has now become more than awful! I’m now even comptimplating seeing it... I will only because I am that devoted but fucking seriously! That is F’D up.” (BWSunderland Angle)

“Errmm well we were already discussing this in the thread designated for new movie news... Of course fans were bitching, and Avery actually threw his two cents into the mix... Quote: There are also theories that Silent Hill is built on the location of a Civil War prison camp [...], and that the Red Pyramids are perverted manifestations of the executioners from that time – which would make them, *ahem*, not necessarily unique to Sunderland.

Roger Avery [...] 19/06/05

Which is’nt a theory as much as it is a fact, based on what is actually told to us in the game, not just fanboy speculation...” (Deathshand)

“You know what, people? Maybe we need to explore the possibility that PH isn’t and never has been, a manifestation or other side of James. That would explain why he’s seen in the comics, and

going to be in the movie. We may have to throw that theory out the window, because let's face it, it's never been confirmed, it's never been acknowledged by Team Silent. And they wouldn't let anything in the movie contradict what they've created, right? We shouldn't complain about something when it's never been a confirmed fact. And maybe this should get locked. It's just a bitch session." (AlexCaine)

This exchange can be considered in terms of a range of rupturing/suturing moves. It begins with 66k7 noting that they are excited about seeing Pyramid Head in the film, but noting that his presence introduces a potential rupture "isn't he James creation?" Icewater's response confirms this, supporting the idea that the producers may have gone against the "Silent Hill mythology already." But the poster goes on to provide a possible suturing move in relation to a local referent – if "James is in the film" there will be no violation of the mythology. Sefiros suggests that Christophe Gans (the director of the film) is not "as big of a Silent Hill fanboy" as Roger Avery had suggested – the implication here is that if he were a 'fanboy' he would be working from an earnest position, and would have an understanding of the logic of the series, and would not breach it in this way. In response, Orestes marks a separation of the film and game canon, prioritising the character of Pyramid Head. BWSunderland Angle suggests that they are now "even contemplating seeing it" – the presumption being that before learning of Pyramid Head's presence they would undoubtedly have seen the film without "contemplating" it. The poster can therefore be seen to be taking an alienated position in relation to the film due to this violation of the series canon; this is only not taken to an extreme (the rejection of the film, and refusal to see it) "because I am that devoted."

The final two posts are somewhat different; each suturing the apparent discrepancy by first providing reference to an alternate theory presented on Roger Avery's blog (Deathshand's post), and secondly, by challenging the canon logic upon which the discrepancy is based through reference to a range of other texts, and the producers of the series (AlexCaine's post). The difference between fan theorising and the presentation of official 'facts' is significant here and explicitly addressed by AlexCaine. These sources provide references that can be recruited in suturing/rupturing moves, however official facts – the externally authored diachronic text - are presented as having more status (and suturing potency) than the former. Developments sanctioned by the producers would thus appear to force the fans to re-evaluate (recon) the established canon.

SERENITY

In discussion of *Serenity* on the *Shiny Blue Sun* forum on COA, the general target is less the fictional universe or text of *Serenity*, and more the constructed, imagined version of ‘Joss Whedon’ as mythologised, celebrated auteur. Posters maintain earnest positions via deference to Whedon – who, as discussed in the previous section provides a key quilting point. He is the focus of attention and adoration:

Hahahaha. I love that guy so much... there is no man I love more than he. He is what I want to be when I grow up: hilarious in every way, and with a loyal fanbase to boot (oh and let's not forget his “moderate” skill in bed) [..] (Gwahir, *Joss Message Re: Serenity*, Sat May 14, 2005 2:06 pm)

Here the idea of ‘Joss Whedon’ is constructed through various synchronising moves (hilarious, inspiring devoted fans, “skill in bed”) in the same way that the fan objects are. The focus of fan attention therefore shifts from texts to celebrity – Whedon becoming the object of fan affiliation.

When rupturing criticisms of *Serenity* appear in the threads they are swiftly and strongly deflected via various suturing moves. Responses to two instances of sceptical positions demonstrate the deployment of differing strategies to negate the challenges of a sceptical position. The first comes from outside of the site – a negative review of the film on another website which is posted by spikerules:

ouch this review isn't very good...
<http://www.leesmovieinfo.net/Article.php?a=693>
This bloke obviously went into the film trying to hate it! (spikerules, *Some more Serenity reviews...*, 8 May 2005, 12:32am)

The review is rejected different ways – in terms of the last sentence “obviously went into the film trying to hate it” read in terms of two general assumptions - the (poor) logic of the reviewer, and general ‘faith’ in the author (Whedon):

Wow. he's an arse, the movie can't be that bad. (Sara Crew, 8 May 2005, 12:59am)

You can call Joss a lot of things, but he DOES NOT create BAD DIALOGUE! [...] This guy wont give ANYTHING above a B... even Sideways only manages a B- in this guy's estimations:) lol! Then again he did manage to give The Village a B+... hang on you say? He gave that tosh of a film a B+ you say? What a stand up moron this guy is! (spikerules, 8 May 2005, 2:21am)

The opinion of the reviewer is here dismissed through the provision of localised evidence of his bad taste (through reference to films he has graded highly, an example of involvement) – such references are introduced alongside general understanding of

faith in Joss's ability ("he DOES NOT create BAD DIALOGUE!," an example of residence).

Criticisms 'from within' are dealt with in similar ways. This can be illustrated via reference to the thread *Serenity Reviews*, where SueAngel cites her highlights and - importantly for my interest in earnest/sceptical modes of identification - her frustrations with the film:

[...] Zoe's Grief - I understand she is an ex-soldier and has learned to control and contain her emotions in order to get the job done but at times it felt like her reaction to her husband's death was a little cold
Lack of character screen time - Don't think Wash was the only one that didn't appear as on screen often as he could, there were a couple of others who didn't appear too much
Mal & Inara - I know it would have been cheesy to get both couples together but maybe one day they will act on their mutual attraction (at least Mal admitted it in a way)and we'll be graced at least with a decent snog (SueAngel, 7 Oct2005, 11:32am)

SueAngel voices these criticisms in a positive way, making local references to the text which demonstrate earnest engagement with the text; frustration in terms of "not enough of..." (screen time), mourning the loss of a central character, citing references to the show ('leaf on the breeze'). Criticisms are established from within the logic of the characters' 'reality' (developing a psychological understanding of Zoe's grief in relation to her identity as a soldier), and through reference to awareness of clichés in relation to film (it would have been cheesy).

Responses to this post gently challenge the criticisms it contains – JamesMFan says "I agree with almost everything" except:

[..] for me, Zoe's grief was spot on. When Kaylee asked where Wash is and she said "He ain't comin'" that was just...wow. Then she didn't speak anymore and just loaded her gun. It was powerful and true to character I think, she wouldn't have openly displayed her grief. Besides, they had to fight for their lives. (JamesMFan, 7 Oct 2005, 12:29pm)

Another poster continues this referencing of the logic of the world and behaviour as being "true to character" (residence):

About Zoe's grief Sue Angel you should take into account the name of the ship. It was named after a battle which by the way it was portrayed was nothing but a slaughter. That kind of battle gives a soldier the ability to control the emotions until after the job is done. Even when you are no longer a soldier you still do it when necessary. [...]. (teetitan, 7 Oct 2005, 4:16pm)

Later in the thread, SueAngel posts a response to these posts and retracts her earlier criticisms. This comes after a second viewing of the film:

After seeing it again, I'm going to retract a little on some of my initial frustrations. I have definitely softened to Zoe's reaction to her husband's death but not completely and do agree with JamesMFan that using *Serenity* as a metaphor for Zoe's future without her husband was a nice

touch. However, I took more heart from the concerned and affectionate exchange of glances (that I missed first time round) that passed between Mal and Inara just as he left on his mission to get the evidence to Mr Universe. It was so subtle but quite touching. I no longer believe that the character's were under utilised. I think each character's screen time was just right. Still bummed about Wash and the sequel not coming round soon enough though!! [...] (SueAngel, 10 Oct 2005, 8:23am)

SueAngel's earlier sceptical position here becomes a blip, quickly resolved by the poster who steps back to establishing an earnest mode of identification with the film. By stepping into line, the poster reinforces the stability of the common enthusiasm for *Serenity*.

7.6 CONCLUSION

To some extent my concern in this chapter has been the ways in which what Samuel Taylor Coleridge referred to as “poetic faith,” is both maintained and undermined within the posting activity on COA and SHH. The chapter demonstrates the struggles to stabilise the object of fan affiliation in the face of new material and the contrasting interests of their memberships. Posters can be seen to be working hard to establish and maintain the fan objects from the multiplicity of the textual material.

This chapter has extended work on the variety of forms of engagement with media texts in fan communities, by exploring the stretching of affiliation, and how positive and negative moves are intertwined within the maintenance of relationships within such settings. Unlike the posters on *Television Without Pity* described by Gray (2006), all of the posters cited here present themselves as “fans” of *Silent Hill* and *Angel*. In doing so they affirm some positive connection with these texts, and to a global community of similar fans. Their connections to the objects are manifest in the ways that the texts are celebrated and essentialised. Here then we find a positive form of affiliation (in contrast to, for example, the picture of negative opting-out of mainstream medicine by those who favour holistic medicine described by Mary Douglas in *Thought Styles* (1996)). However this affiliation also emerges as unstable at different points and it is important not to ignore the destabilising moves visible within discussion of these texts.

The schemas I have developed in considering this instability go beyond distinctions within existing typologies of audience approaches to media texts – such as the identification of “ways of watching” (Barker and Brooks, 1998) or distinction between

close and distanced readings of texts - instead opening out analytical spaces with which to explore the establishing and breaking of identification with an object of interest within these settings (moments in which belief is suspended). The introduction of a modality of nostalgia, and the formation of earnest/sceptical modes of identification via suturing and rupturing moves, provides a language to describe the nature of this movement. Whilst Gray's work on antifandom identifies two sources of 'anti-ness' - as coming from either moral or realistic frameworks - in the terms that I have introduced here, those who are marking out sceptical positions may be making reference to moral or realistic markers, or identify with other referents. In doing so in each case they are emphasising an ethical emphasis (it "should" be like this).

In contrast to the descriptions of fan cultures as "wild zones" in Harrington and Bielby discussed in Chapter 2, my approach to COA and SHH in this chapter may appear to present a conservative picture of fan activity. In terms of the picture of the settings presented so far, the focus on establishing textual coherence and deference to the objects goes against the focus on fans' more 'resistant' appropriation of media texts in fan studies work. It would have been possible to examine the expansion and pluralising of meanings in activity such as fanfiction writing. Due to the nature of the sites (where fanfiction production is a minor activity), and my sampled data (which as discussed in Chapter 3 has focused on posting activity relating to specific developments/events), my focus has been on the establishing and development of the fans' understanding of their favoured texts in these sites. Importantly here, these moves are tied into the formation of community relations on the sites, and thus tied into the pedagogic moves within the settings.

In respect of this, the analysis presented in this chapter begins to suggest discontinuities between the two sites. The discussion of COA in this chapter has introduced a number of different, destabilising events that posters on COA configured as rupturing moves – the death of Wesley, unhappiness with an episode, and criticisms of *Serenity*. In each case these criticisms were closed down, earnest modes of identification maintained via a range of suturing moves. In contrast, within the discussion of SH4 on SHH, such closure was apparently unachievable (or undesired) - the posters instead maintain opposing positions and form specialised encampments. The same is seen in discussion of the *Silent Hill* film – where posters are both excited and horrified about the presence

of Pyramid Head in the film. Here, however, we see an external referent authority being introduced (the producers), which overrides the speculation of fans and is presented as a significant suturing influence.

In Chapter 3 I referenced Dowling's description of how the development of a language of description involves equilibrating moves between empirical and theoretical domains and the way in which new data can be disequilibrating. The suturing of rupturing moves described in this chapter, particularly those ruptures introduced by new material, can perhaps be considered in terms of a similar movement – as involving (continuing Dowling's recontextualisation of Piaget's language) the assimilation and accommodation of new textual material with the fans' existing language. Extending this, the formation of pro-and anti-camps relating to SH4 – which are sustained by the group – might be considered as regions of "specialisation" within the activity (see Piaget, 1980, see also Dowling 1996).

As we have seen in this chapter, rupturing strategies can open out fissures both within the canon, and inspire the formation of oppositions and alliances between the members of these sites. In the next chapter I will extend my consideration of de/stabilising moves in these sites by examining the ways that members of these sites position themselves against, with, and in deference to, each other.

CHAPTER 8: DECORUM IN THE FORUM(S): AUTHORITY, EXPERTISE AND SUBSERVIANCE

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The chapter extends the literature on “how, when and where [fans are] allowed to speak” (Macdonald, 1998, 132), by exploring the ways that authority is claimed, recognised, and contested on the forums of COA and SHH. As I described in Chapter 2, fan studies researchers and those interested in online communities have focused increasing attention on the formation of hierarchy and processes of in/exclusion within what had earlier been characterised as egalitarian, democratic cultures. My analysis in this chapter continues this work by exploring the strategies by which activity in SHH and COA is regulated and policed, and by examining internecine struggles for legitimacy and status in these sites. In doing so, I move from considering the positions that members take in respect of the texts that inspire fan affiliation, to the positions that they mark out in relation to each other. This positioning will be examined in relation to two activities on the COA and SHH forums – the policing of conflict and/or ‘deviant’ behaviour, and processes of help-seeking (and giving). Each involves the deployment of, and appeals to, ‘authority,’ and moves to apprentice members (which are not always successful). Examining these processes enables consideration of the formation and maintenance of hierarchy within these sites.

My use of the term ‘hierarchy’ is not intended to suggest a fixed structure, but instead the marking out and negotiation of similarity and difference between posters in forum discussion. It is important to note, however, that there is a hierarchy of status and control built into the organisational structures of the forums of COA and SHH. In Chapter 3 I made reference to some of the features of these structures – the ownership of SHH by Vixx and Yates and their staff of moderators and administrators, for instance, and the elevated status of the COA Council. In each case, these provide a top-down regulatory force. The activities they support, however, contain dynamic jockeying for status, the opportunity for career progression, and challenges to those in ‘power.’ In this chapter, one of my driving interests is in the way the relationship between these two influences - between what Baym (2002) has termed the “operational power” built into the design of online communities and “patterns of participation” within them - is configured and contested within posting activity on these sites. The

ongoing struggle to balance openness and regulation (Herring, 2002) is central to this concern.

By focusing on strategic action, this chapter problematises the stability that underpins the conception of authority that has tended to dominate existing work on hierarchies within fan cultures (although, as discussed in Chapter 2, researchers have now begun to examine the strategies by which positions are established within fan communities). Macdonald's (1998) early and influential work on hierarchies within fan communities, which I introduced in Chapter 2, can be used as an example here to demonstrate the move that is being made. In her discussion of 'Alex,' one of the influential 'executive fans' within the *Quantum Leap* fandom, Macdonald states that Alex "moved to the forefront" of the fandom, and was able to "maintain" her position within cmc environments – yet the strategies by which this position was established, defended, and perhaps challenged, is not explored.

The analysis presented in this chapter begins a consideration of othering within these contexts and will be extended in a somewhat different way in Chapter 9. Here my concern is with the marking out of difference and similarity between members; the exclusion, regulation and apprenticeship of posters marked as different (inferior/deviant) for example, but also the ways in which posters identify with other more experienced members of the sites. These moves involve the construction of a range of demonised and reified identities. By arguing that members of these sites recruit others in order to define their own positions - in ways which may potentially be either negatively or positively charged - this chapter challenges Sarah Thornton's statement that within the popular domain:

Distinctions are never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of *others*. (Thornton, 1995, 10; her emphasis)

The posting activity on COA and SHH demonstrates that assertions of difference do not necessarily involve claims to the other's inferiority, but are also involved in attempts to take on status by referencing or aligning with more established/experienced members. This is particularly the case on SHH, where posters requesting gameplay assistance will be seen to establish subservient positions.

An existing analytical framework relating to modes of authority action (Dowling, 2001, 2004a, in press) is recruited in the analysis in this chapter. This will be presented in the next section. I will then use this language to examine the organisational structure on COA and SHH (Section 8.3). This will be followed by a discussion of the authority claims and regulatory strategies demonstrated within posting activity during points of conflict in SHH and COA (Section 8.4). The chapter will close with an exploration of how expertise is requested and provided on these sites – focusing specifically on help-seeking activity in relation to gameplay issues on SHH.

8.2 ACTION AND AUTHORITY

Dowling’s modes of authority action (2001, 2004, in press) provides a language for describing the differing strategies by which authority is claimed on COA and SHH. The schema presents a conceptualisation of authority as strategic action rather than essentialised states. This enables consideration of authority in terms of ongoing struggles within social activity.

Dowling begins by reformulating Weber’s three ideal types of legitimising authority - the traditional, the charismatic, and the bureaucratic/legal - into two variables. These relate to who can speak, and what can be said, within any interaction between author and audience. Authority may be claimed as a closure (as opposed to openness) of the field of practice, and/or a closure (as opposed to openness) of the category of author. The cross-product of these two variables is presented in Figure 8.1. This introduces a new, fourth mode of authority, which Dowling terms the “liberal”; this relates to the absence of authority (or, rather, a claim to the absence of authority).

Category of author	Field of Practice	
	Open	Closed
Closed	Charismatic	Traditional
Open	Liberal	Bureaucratic

Fig. 8.1 Modes of authority action (Dowling, 2004a)

The differences between these four modes can be illustrated by making reference to Dowling’s paper, “Quixote’s Science” (in press). Dowling describes the emergence of a range of bureaucratising technologies (school curricula, qualifications frameworks,

software such as Adobe Photoshop) as involving the destabilisation of the traditional authority of expert voices (in these cases, teachers and photographers). These technologies, Dowling argues, are “emergent upon the weakening of the esoteric control of the traditional expert over the form of institutionalisation of the practices to which they relate” (no page nos.) and therefore involved in potentially undermining claims to the traditional authority vested in the individual as expert. The bureaucratisation of ethical decision making in social science research discussed in Chapter 4 can be seen as an example of this; here the authority claims of the researcher are overruled by the ethical guidelines which themselves serve as a bureaucratic technology (ideally, ensuring that correct ethical practice is assured if guidelines are followed).

In “Quixote’s Science” Dowling reflects upon the establishing of authority claims in academic production. The different modes of authority are introduced in discussion of the ways in which academic writing attempts to establish the authority of the speaking academic voice, in both traditional and bureaucratic modes, each of which “invoke[s] institutionalised, which is to say stabilised practices” (no page nos.). This may involve speaking as member of a university faculty, maintaining an academic style of writing, bearing appropriate qualifications, and citing other expert voices in establishing the authority of the academic’s voice. However this stability produces redundancy - anathema to the academic search for originality (although Dowling suggests a *traditional* claim to originality in replication studies which offer empirical - rather than theoretical - originality). It is here that Dowling introduces the *charismatic* mode of authority, which opens out practice, but can be challenged in relation to institutionalised evaluation:

In establishing the originality of this essay I am at least in some respects attempting to deploy a charismatic authority action. I am served in this respect by the facility to refer to my own previous publications, establishing myself as an author of already accepted (and so publicly acknowledged as original) practice. Naturally, there is a general level of resistance in the field to charismatic claims to originality because they must stand in competition with others. My essay, then, must extend, even distort and transform the discourse, but I do not have free license. (no page nos.)

In this conceptualisation of strategic authority, the academic author is engaged with opening practice through charismatic moves (which challenge and extend the practice in potentially new directions) whilst also maintaining the markers of traditional and bureaucratic authority (which ensure that the academic’s position within the institutionalised practice is reinforced). Considered in terms of the modes of nostalgia introduced in the previous chapter, this involves a balancing of repeat and mod

strategies; what must be repeated/what may be modified. Each is necessary to sustain an acceptable authorial voice. In this context - in which the central activity is regulated by academic requirements that close down the possibilities for 'open' authorship - *liberal* authority is possible only for the "private audience," and not for the author:

[...] unless you intend or are required to respond to this essay in public, then there are no necessary constraints on the way in which you read and make use of it (or choose not to). The essay stands as a resource or reservoir of resources for recruitment by the audience and, in this aspect, the relationship between author and audience is one of *exchange*. (no page nos.)

In a pedagogic mode of interaction – as discussed in Chapter 5 – the author seeks to control the principles of evaluation. The liberal mode of authority, in contrast, involves an exchange mode of interaction, transferring these principles to the audience. In the liberal mode of authority action there is no restriction upon who can speak or what can be said; it is, then, the strategy that declines authorial authority in exchange mode. Neither COA or SHH is an 'open,' unregulated space. In each setting, the site's organisation and in-built hierarchies introduce restrictions on both authorship and the form/content of utterances which are manifest in various ways. It is to these organisational features, and the modes of authority which are asserted in their presentation, that I now turn.

8.3 THE ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF COA AND SHH

An examination of the organisational structure of COA and SHH, and members' discussion of the management of these sites, demonstrates how the distinctions between open/closed authorship and practice in the charismatic, traditional, bureaucratic and liberal modes, can be productive in the analysis of such settings. In each site, activity is regulated in ways which work to maintain a driving ideal of what these communities should be like. Just as the nature of the fan objects is defined and negotiated on the sites, so, too, the nature of COA and SHH as functioning environments is configured in ways which open and close down activity. Here, however, these become institutionalised guidelines presented in the *FAQs** and *Rules of Use* on each site. These outline what can be said and how it should be discussed – the appropriateness of content and style of postings (no flaming*/no threadjacking*/marking spoilers* etc), and the segregation of topics of discussion within the structure of the different forums. These mark out the bureaucratic legislation and traditional responsibilities to be taken up in engaging on these sites. Whilst they suggest the possibility of charismatic moves, they appear to

deny liberal openness (although some spaces on the boards are more “open” than others. The general discussion forums on each site, for example are regulated differently from the object-related forums that I have focused on in my thesis).

In Chapter 2 I described how the establishment of norms (and destabilising rule-breaking) in studies of online communities is presented as being localised and context dependent. Comparison of COA and SHH reveals general differences in style, content, and anticipated audience; these are manifest in the concerns about deviance on these sites. COA, for example, presents itself as open to a general audience, posting warnings against swearing and pornographic material on the site. SHH has similar rules against the posting of ‘porno’ and abuse, however it does not regulate profanity (as the language in some of the extracts presented in this chapter will demonstrate).

Differences are also seen in the administrative regulations presented on COA and SHH which define how members are expected to behave. The *Rules of Use* from each site, for example, emphasise different modes of authority. On COA’s forums, the responsibility of the staff and ‘citizens’ are set out in the following terms:

It is not the COA staff’s intention or responsibility to police the board or enforce these guidelines but rather be present to assist with them. The information contained herein should not be considered ironclad rules, regard them as guidelines that are followed by the majority. Please take this information in the manner with which it is regarded, as a tool of help and consideration of your fellow posters. (COA Administration, *A Few Things to Consider Before Posting.....*, 17 Feb 2005, 11:47am)

The COA Administration here claims to speak with bureaucratic authority (reflected by the username), outlining the responsibilities of individual COA citizens, and delimiting the authority strategies which may be claimed by members of the community in their own posting activity. There is a suggestion that being a member of COA involves speaking in a certain way (following the guidelines that are set). The space is not presented as an open space for play, but one which comes with a set of obligations which close down the practice, and promote a traditional mode of authority. The use of terms such as “not ironclad rules” and “tool of help,” however, also opens the practice to incorporate charismatic authority claims that posters may demonstrate in their activity. This suggests that members are able to define the discourse to some extent. As the post continues, however, it is made clear that staff will intervene in order to police activity and enforce the regulations (the ultimate threat being the exclusion of posters, after a series of warnings):

These boards will be regularly monitored and problems threads or posts may be edited, deleted or locked. [...] a CoA Staff member should be contacted if you encounter a problem poster or are being personally harassed or threatened or a post becomes disrespectful. This does not include posters that disagree with your opinions etc. [...] (ibid)

Alongside this, the intervention of a bureaucratic regulatory technology is mentioned in relation to the site being an “All ages posting board”:

There is a word censor in place that should capture most forms of profanity. Please do not try to get around the censor by using asterisks or symbols to replace letters of a word. (ibid)

Initially, then, the post addresses the potential citizen as responsible author, offering the possibility of charismatic openness. This openness is then closed down by the introduction of regulatory mechanisms - the presence of staff, the technological intervention of word censor – which work to exclude elements of activity. Possible charismatic moves - such as the use of asterisks to sidestep restrictions - are denied legitimacy within the setting.

The introduction to the *Rules of Use* on SHH is worded somewhat differently:

We here at SHH try our best in providing a comfortable space for all to share our love of the Silent Hill series and to offer our opinions on various other subject. We ask that you review the following guidelines for the forum so we can keep this community as respectful and friendly as possible. (Amazonagent, *SHH Forum Guidelines*, 2 Dec 2004, 6:47am)

Here bureaucratic authority is introduced first; the SHH staff are responsible for providing a service, and policing the forums. The responsibility of community members is secondary, but still attributed importance.

As well as the administrative regulation of activity, signifiers of membership and status on COA and SHH serve to establish individual member’s position within the forums. Markers of status include joined dates, posting numbers, job titles of staff members, and title ranks relating to post counts on SHH (see Fig. 8.2):

Just Passing Through (0)
Cafe5to2 Waitress (150)
My Bestsellers Clerk (300)
Gravedigger (450)
Hope House Careworker (600)
Brookhaven Receptionist (750)
Woodside Apartments Janitor (1000)
Rosewater Park Attendant (1250)
Subway Guard (1500)
Historical Society Historian (1750)
Cult Member (2000)

Fig. 8.2: *Breakdown of Title Ranks*, posted by Amazon Agent, *Silent Hill Post Office*, Wed 07 Dec, 2005 5:10 pm (related post count in brackets)

These signifiers of position can be opened up in a similar way to the rules of use. To some degree, the post counts appear to provide an in-built and automated marker of bureaucratic authority, as those with highest post counts could be deemed the most experienced members on the forums. The fact that SHH members can access a list of all of SHH members - organized by post numbers - also suggests a quantifiable hierarchy (as does the 'joined by' date). However this can be challenged via reference to the content of posts. Evidence of hostility towards those perceived to be bolstering their post counts via inane posting activity⁸⁹ is evident on both sites (this can be interpreted as a marker of sceptical identification with the forums). Such hostility demonstrates that the quality of posts, as well as the quantity, is regarded as significant on the forums. Some idea of a notion of quality is seen in the following response to a post about the campaign to "Save Angel" (see Chapter 9):

Some good points there Njal. Nice Network reference as well. Unfortunately reality TV is in its prime (or just past it), and is still going strong. You and I and a handful of others are sick of this garbage but the majority rules ratings. I do believe that reality TV will not last and I do believe that the buffyverse will continue in some form. Nice post overall. (Vicious, 2 Apr 2004, 19:25)

Such praise - demonstrating an evaluation of the merits of the post - suggests a focus on traditional/charismatic authority strategies.

The role and status of the staff members of COA and SHH – those who hold office within these sites – can also be considered in relation to the modes of authority action. These members occupy positions which grant them bureaucratic authority on these sites (the power to move/delete posts etc). This authority is in some ways independent of the nature of the individual member holding it. This can be seen in references to the threat of "the moderators" as an abstract policing force typical on forums, which was seen in the negative criticism of SHH by SHF members in Chapter 6. Their authority is itself regulated by the community regulatory practices set by the owners of the sites, those who in Benedict's (1946/2005) terms are the "original authorities" on these sites.⁹⁰

Yet in terms of how their authority is realised, the style of moderation, and deployment of authority strategies, there are characteristic differences between moderators. Here we

⁸⁹ Maybe its just me but this seems like a completely useless thread existing solely for post count. (Xander, *Straying from the path.....*, COA Forums, 28 March 2005, 1:54pm)

⁹⁰ The presence of these owners may be more or less visible. In my data from SHH Vixx is dominant, however on COA it is not the owners, but two of the UK staff members SueAngel and bluebear who display the ultimate authority on the forums.

can consider the ‘personalities’ of different moderators as established via their posting history (which as discussed in Chapter 6, is typically read as being consistently authored). On SHH this is reinforced by the fact that the moderators are appointed, having ‘earned’ their positions (the career progression on COA is less clear). In a post about a reshuffle of SHH staff members, for example, Vixx explains the process of becoming part of the SHH team:

And in case you’re wondering, yes, we are always on the lookout for new staffers. There are no rules to follow though – your post count irrelevant (although you will have to have been a regular member here for some time, usually), your knowledge of the game must be good to excellent (but not necessarily encyclopaedic) and you must be friendly, easy-going, have good written and communication skills. And that’s pretty much all there is to it. All we ask is that you don’t ask – I’ve yet to choose a moderator just cos s/he wanted to be one. Believe me, if you’re all of the things above you’ll be noticed and, stick around long enough, and you never know when we’ll drop you an invite. (Vixx, *Staffing List & How to Be a Moderator*, 16 Aug 2004, 8:32pm)

The criteria for employment is here presented in a way which sets out the grounding for traditional authority within the site, and also suggests ‘good form’; this includes “being noticed” rather than volunteering. Vixx suggests that the route to obtaining bureaucratic authority on the site involves the demonstration of traditional/charismatic authority strategies over time, and that this will be recognised by those in charge.

There is evidence here of the importance of taking ones “proper station” (Benedict, 1946/2005) within these sites, the underlying expectations about appropriate behaviour that occasionally seem to contravene the stated ethos of the sites. For example, whilst on COA the wording of the *Rules of Use* is presented in terms of shared responsibility, there are examples of hostility to those who emulate the tone of those with bureaucratic authority on this site. This can be seen in the following interaction from a discussion of posting etiquette in the thread *A question for SueAngel*:

You are desperate to become a site monitor here aren’t u. (Buffy Buff, 30 Jan 2004, 2:18am).

It’s not that. I’ve just seen so many message boards degenerate into absolute crap due to pointless posts and unmonitored spoilers and whatnot. I actually like this forum and want to help keep it running smoothly. . (MJ, 30 Jan 2004, 12:21)

OH calm down SA [SueAngel] and BB [Bluebear] have it under control...they don’t need you delegating to the masses of COA what the rules are. (Buffy Buff, 30 Jan 2004, 17:21)

Bluebear intervenes:

We love the fact you all help us its what makes a community. Many people off the site will email us when problems crop up and its great to know so many want to keep this site great by giving us the heads up. (31 Jan 2004, 8:37am)

Here we see further examples of explicit references to COA as a “community,” and the reinforcement of the significance of community membership, this is here tied to a group responsibility for maintaining relationships within the setting.

On another thread, however, when The_Vigilante asks about the fate of COA after the ending of *Angel*, another member – Peterson – responds; “Firstly, this has been asked many times use the search engine to find your answers, if you can’t email them.” (*Couple of Questions for the Council*, 20 April 2005, 12:34). The_Vigilante replies “Sorry, i didn’t realise you were part of the council! That was sarcasm btw.” (20 April 2004, 13:05). Here SueAngel intervenes in a different way to her colleague bluebear, by reasserting the difference between the staff and citizens, rather than marking shared endeavour;

Hi. Hopefully I can answer your questions and I can say that I definitely AM on The Council and I certainly don’t recall seeing Peterson at any of our recent blood lettings..... (SueAngel, 20 Apr 2004, 13:31)

The_Vigilante then puts his/herself forward for consideration:

While we are on the subject of the council, is there any chance I can help out at all, since I have been a regular on here for about 3 years now and am on here at least every other day. Let me know! (The_Vigilante, 20 Apr 2004, 13:36)

to which one poster responds:

covers ears I’m not hearing this, I’m not hearing this..... (BlueFemme, 20 Apr 2004, 13:38)

The antipathy here towards those who put themselves forwards as potential staff members is similar to that demonstrated by Vixx on SHH. Whilst members of COA are presented as being relied upon to maintain the site (traditional mode of authority), the bureaucratic hierarchy is strongly enforced here, perhaps even more so than on SHH where Vixx’s description of how to become noticed at least suggests that advancement is possible.

The moderators on SHH are more confrontational than their equivalents on COA, and inspire some hostility on the SHH forums. An exchange within the thread *Too Much Modding* demonstrates how the authority of the moderators is positioned in relation to the authority of the SHH’s owners Vixx and Yates. The discussion opens with the following post:

It’s not a huge deal, and I dunno if anyone else feels the same way I do, but I think there’s generally too many moderators on these forums. So much so that it feels like they look for ways to

use their power, even if it's not really needed. [...] Seriously, it's starting to feel like you gotta watch out for the Gestapo, because if you do anything at all out of line, you'll conveniently "disappear." [...] (WalterSullivanTragedy, 2 Dec 2005, 11:39pm)

Here we see a movement from a liberal opening strategy (which passes evaluation to the audience in “I dunno if anyone else feels the same way”) to a focus on bureaucratic authority (a comparison of the member/moderator relationship). The closing off of practice by the moderators is a key concern here, suggesting that they are overstepping their bureaucratic positions. Unfortunately for WalterSullivanTragedy, this post immediately falls foul of the site’s regulations, with Pink_isnt_well000 noting that they have posted in the wrong forum. The post had been moved to the correct location (the *Silent Hill Post Office*) by a moderator by the time I read it.⁹¹

Moderator responses to this topic deflected the challenge back onto the regular users of the site, through reference to the ultimate authority held by the owners of SHH:

It seems like every few weeks a new topic pops up complaining about us “being too vigilant”, or there being too many of us, or us being evil Nazis. Usually by people who are unhappy that they can’t spam. Not always, but usually. I grow weary of it. There’s a reason we do what we do, and ultimately it is up to Vixx and Yates, the ones who OWN the forum. [...] (Drewfus, *Too much modding*, 3 December 2005, 2:44am)

The mods are tasked with a duty, which is to moderate the forum according to how the owners want it moderated [...] IF you are so perturbed by the amount of therads being closed then maybe instead of complaining about how we do our jobs, help the newer members in telling them where posts should go or even direct them to the forum guidelines. [...] (Amazonagent, 3 December 2005, 3:06am)

The rejection of these criticisms by these two moderators involves a reinforcement of the bureaucratic structure of the site. Dowling has suggested that bureaucratic authority is “likely to be associated with an assertion (or reassertion) of the dominance of the official over the local, the public over the private” (Dowling, in press, no page nos.); in these posts we see a similar recourse to official and public responsibility. Whilst the moderators are defended by some members, WalterSullivanTragedy’s complaint garners support in various forms; complaints that the mods occasionally use bad language, always think they are right, and break their own rules, leading to the presentation of examples of moderators’ own bad practices, including spamming and aggressive postings.

⁹¹ For this reason, I do not know where the message was originally posted.

Vixx's intervention (as owner of SHH) in this thread establishes the laws of the site and the ethics of the community:

A board is nothing without its members, but it's also nothing without good staff, either. Like any good partnership, it's about respect and compromise. If anyone has a problem with a staff member here, I ask that you PM or email me directly. See your avatar in your dashboard at the top? My contacts are right there. There'll be no repercussions; I've been PMed in the past about similar concerns and have forwarded concerns directly to Mods for discussion. Each valid complaint is dealt with accordingly and warnings sent to staff if necessary. Everyone is welcome to post here, whether you've been here since Day One or since yesterday - no one member is valued over any other, staffer or not. (post 36, 4 December 2005, 9:32pm)

Here Vixx posits a bureaucratic assertion which proposes a liberal environment (at least in so far as posters follow the rules); this reduces the distance between members and moderators. The argument continues, however, inspiring some incendiary posts, such as a post by one poster who suggests that if members don't like the rules they should "[...] just shut the fuck up and leave. We don't need you. This isn't a democracy" (BloodyBunny, 6 Dec 2005, 6:39am). Vixx finally draws the discussion to a close after 71 messages with the following post:

This just seems to be going in circles and now members are attacking each other. [...] I'm going to close this. Everything's already been said. If you have a problem, PM me directly please - I take every one seriously and no-one need feel victimised or anxious about this. (6 Dec 2005, 6:43am)

Vixx's interventions here suggests that whilst the moderators are able to deploy bureaucratic authority, this can be usurped by the ultimate authority of the owners. On the same day, Vixx notes in another thread about the "mod squad" that complaints have been received about moderators in the past and that "those Moderators have been approached and/or warned [...]," noting ominously "I will be dealing with them shortly" (*Two Part Question*, 6 Dec 2005, 8:41pm).

The exploration of COA and SHH in relation to Dowling's modes of authority action has here begun to suggest some discontinuities between the stated values of these forums and the activity they house. The emphasis on bureaucratic authority on SHH does not defend the holder from having to act responsibly, but at the same time, this site - which appeared from the rules of use more hierarchical (in terms of providing a service) - is revealed to be more open to 'bottom up' challenges than COA. I will now turn to the different ways in which authority emerges within posting activity on these sites.

8.4 REGULATING ACTIVITY: MODES OF AUTHORITY AND MODERATION

The data that I have introduced so far in this chapter has focused on discussion of the administration/regulation of COA and SHH. In this section my focus is on stabilising moves to deal with conflict and deviance within the forum activity on these sites. I will also explore the varied nature of moderation in these settings.

COA

SueAngel's and BlueBears' efforts to maintain the stability of COA in the posting activity I have examined takes a number of forms. These include interventions within discussions, and the posting of warning topics; topics such as *Behaviour in the Codex*, *Spoilers and Repetitive threads*, *Bickering.. It stops now!* and *WHERE ARE THE SPOILERS????*. Alongside these markers of what Ruth Benedict (1946/2005) terms "executive" authority on the forums of COA, a reliance upon traditional/charismatic strategies by COA members working to deal with 'deviant' citizens is also visible. In this section I am going to consider this work as a series of stabilising but also excluding moves, and how these result in the objectification of members who are denied legitimacy within the site.

In the previous chapter I introduced data from the latter part of 2005 relating to the release of *Serenity*. This discussion was notable for the maintenance of an earnest, almost incontrovertible celebration of Joss Whedon. I discussed how the reified concept of Whedon-as-auteur served as a key quilting point when dealing with/rejecting sceptical positions on the forum. An examination of threads from the site a year before, during the campaign to "Save Angel," presents a different image of interactions on the sites. Rather than the earnest stability of the threads relating to *Serenity*, a number of threads are marked by discord and heated arguments, with two posters - Angelus and Angel_Fan632 - achieving some notoriety. The posting activity of one of these, Angel_Fan632 (AF632), and the responses of other COA members to this poster, presents an opportunity to see how members deal with persistent offenders who refuse to toe the line.

The reaction to AF632 in the topic *Joss Whedon Never Cared About ATS* is one example of this. AF632 opens the thread with the following criticism of Joss Whedon and his role in the downfall of *Angel*:

Ok he [Whedon] did care about Angel but was not emotionally invested in like he was for the first 3 seasons of Buffy it was just a financial investment to him rather than an emotional one cause Angel has been moved arround more times and to other sets than Buffy or any other show in the history of TV has.

1st: The Detective Office in Season 1

2nd: The Hyperion (Which they should of kept and still be there cause it is ATS⁹²)

3rd: W&H⁹³ (What sence does this make)

For the past 3 years Joss Whedon has only CARED about one thing and that is FIREFLY and trying the find guest spots on Buffy & Angel so he can hock them off to try and promote a movie where as he don't give a rats ass about the rest of the cast of either show and there feelings except for those on FireFly he boots Charisma Carpenter⁹⁴ & Vincent Kartheiser⁹⁵ out of the show 2 of the most impotant people in Angel's life only to bring over 2 Buffy refugee's like Spike & Harmony who have no emotional strings to Angel maybe Spike but he hadn't seen the guy in 4 years so why tell a story now and yet a actress named Sarah Thompson who's portrail as Eve is so crindge worthy you'd be better of locking yourself in a Iced Cellar for an hour naked than here her scenes with anyone.

Joss Whedon only sold his soul to the WB [Warner Bros. TV network] to get this season so he could promote his Firefly movie coming out later the year with bringing over yet another FireFly star over Adam Baldwin who plays Hamilton for the the last 5 episodes like the ENTIRE FRICKIN SHOW. [...]" (Angel_Fan632, 9 Apr 2004, 09:18am)

This is a very different characterisation of Joss Whedon from that presented in the previous chapter. The post contains three incendiary claims: Whedon has betrayed the *Angel/BtVS* actors, has sold his soul to the WB* for *Firefly*, and is financially rather than emotionally invested in the series. This demonstrates both charismatic and traditional authority claims, opening up an oppositional reading of *Angel* and Whedon (within this context), whilst also implying knowledge of the field and therefore closing down the 'facts.'

The criticism of Whedon/*Angel* is repeated by AF632 in various forms in posts throughout the thread as s/he mourns the "destruction of [her/his] favourite tv show ever." As proof of Whedon's culpability, AF632 introduces a range of supporting evidence:

⁹² "Angel the Series"

⁹³ "Wolfram and Hart," a law firm in the *Angel* series which works for the forces of evil, and which Angel and his team join in order to fight evil from within in season 5 of *Angel*.

⁹⁴ Actress, played Cordelia Chase on *Buffy* and *Angel*.

⁹⁵ Actor, played Angel's son Connor.

[...] if Joss Whedon did care about Angel than why didn't he let it stand on it's own after Buffy finished close the doors on both Bangel & Spuffy⁹⁶ to go forward into the story instead of going back and insulting us with at least 1 buffy reference in every episode making both Angel & Spike look like jackasses and pushing Spike as a Champion instead of Angel he doesn't care face the facts. (AF632, 9 Apr 2004, 10:09am)

thats good to know I just think we would off been better off if Angel had end at S4 I mean look at Harms Way⁹⁷ for god sake even the writting was terrible: [...] The bottom line is the show is just not the same rush job epsiodes like this one and some others aren't going to cut it with me. (AF632, 9 Apr 2004, 10:31am)

[...] look at the scenes this season and look at the carefully Look at David's⁹⁸ scenes and then Alexis's⁹⁹ they both look bored to death just being there you can see it in there eyes they know they are getting crap to work with. (AF532, 9 Apr 2004, 10:35pm)

On one level these criticisms can be read in terms of the distinction between synchronic/diachronic nostalgia and earnest/sceptical identification introduced in the previous chapter. There, in discussion of Season 5, unwanted developments were accepted in the context of the authorial vision of Whedon and his team via earnest moves to explain the changes. In contrast, AF632 interprets the season as demonstrating elements of what *Angel* should not be. This reading is established via a range of referents – including the change of sets, the introduction of Spike as a character in *Angel* and as a potential “Champion”¹⁰⁰ (Angel appears to be presented as the ‘rightful’ champion), the quality of writing and episodes, and the look in the actor’s eyes. The series of ruptures within *Angel* corpus that AF632 identifies establishes a sceptical position in relation to both *Angel* and Whedon. The shifting of referents, however, makes it difficult to identify the earnest identification from which these crimes are being identified. There is some sense of an ideal past which Whedon has corrupted, with return/repeat modes of nostalgia driving these criticisms; AF632 appears to prioritise a synchronic rather than diachronic chronotope (this is recognized by another poster who suggests that AF632 wants the series to stay the same).

My main interest here is in how these criticisms are dealt with. The varying referents in these posts - which see AF632 moving between estranged/alienated positions - lead to the poster being criticised for their inconsistency. AF632’s failure to develop one argument, and shifting references between the local and general, real and fictional, is

⁹⁶ “Bangel” and “Spuffy” are references to the romantic relationships between Buffy/Angel and Spike/Buffy.

⁹⁷ Episode 97, Season 5.

⁹⁸ David Boreanaz, actor, plays Angel

⁹⁹ Alexis Denisof, actor, plays Wesley Wyndham Price.

¹⁰⁰ This relates to the Shanshu prophecy.*

central to many of the criticisms s/he receives from the other posters on the thread, with AF632's comment "you can see it in there eyes" leading to the poster being mocked as an "empath."

Each of the criticisms presented by AF632 is deflected by posters who work both individually and in tandem to attempt to counteract AF632's 'negativity' - characterised by posters as "Joss Hating" - by refuting and challenging AF632's claims. Such attempts at deflection via a range of suturing moves, can be seen in responses to the criticism of the move between sets introduced in AF632's first post:

Your initial comment about Angel moving around may indeed be true but what was your point exactly? The Scoobies base of operations moved around even more. [...] (Technopagan, 9 Apr 2004, 10:44am)

Sorry AF632 but you are making this up as you go along. You argue that the library wasn't important because they had left school. Well Angel and the guys have moved on as well. The Scoobies were just as emotionally attached to the library as the fang gang were to the Hyperion. Both spent 3 years in their respective "homes". The Hyperion is still there by the way so that blows yet another hole in your theory. Care to change your arguement again? (Technopagan, 9 Apr 2004, 11:02am)

Nobody lives in the same place forever AF. People do move y'know. I've lived 9 different places. (Tony, 9 Apr 2004, 11:18am)

Here the posters make different moves recruiting general and local referents - correcting facts relating to the series, and setting forth general statements - in their attempt to persuade/discredit AF632.

Alongside the correction of facts relating to the chronology of the text, and nature of life in general, a number of posters address the changes AF632 has introduced via reference to the development of the chronotope – working to align the actual and ideal texts. This move is demonstrated by a number of posters. Scarlet, for example, provides a (very long) post which traces the trajectory of Angel the character and *Angel* the series in relation to the changes in location/sets:

I don't know if Mr. Whedon is apathetic towards "Angel," but I do have a response to the different scenery throughout the show. The change in locations is representative of Angel's life. In the first season, Angel was living underground. This is literal and metaphorical. He was distant and removed from society. [...] The Wolfram & Hart offices are cold, distant, and hollow, but I think that's the point. Now Angel is living high above the ground inside his proverbial ivory tower and has managed to cut himself off from the world almost moreso than he was before his encounter with Doyle [...] (Scarlett, 10 Apr 2004, 01:06am)

Here, as in the discussion of *Serenity* in Chapter 7, the poster is presenting differing charismatic suturing moves that relate to the logic of the fictional universe.

Within these moves, at certain points, attention turns from the content of AF632's posting, to the style of his/her posts. In response to one of the few posts that supported AF632, one poster comments on AF632's posting style, suggesting that it is not just AF632's range of referents and refusal to listen that is problematic, but also her/his writing style:

I know,cando,everyone has different opinions,and thats great.AF632s problem is his presentation.He comes on like Angel sux now,DBs unhappy,Whedon doesnt care,none of the actors want to be there,it should be cancelled,season 6 is a bad idea.Ive never seen him just post something positive,and he always comes on like we should all feel the way he does.So its his own fault he draws the ire of most people here. (Tony, 10 Apr 2004, 18:49)

AF632's presentation style is also mocked elsewhere when he uses the word "funerment" – an error that is picked up by a number of posters as evidence of her/his failure to prove his authority/legitimacy as a poster. This challenges AF632's traditional claim to authority:

AF632, i can only assume that you mean fundaments (funerments, hehe) in which case then you are correct that atonement and redemption have been missing from the show this year. [...] (Technopagan, 9 April 2004, 13:14)

Well, I hope they meant fundaments since furnerments isn't even close to being an actual word. (Rebecca, 19 April 2004, 15:01)

Although AF632 acknowledges this error in spelling, s/he continues to refuse to acknowledge the criticisms of her/his argument. Instead AF632 stands their ground, rejecting all of the corrections, and continuing to attempt to enforce their own hegemonic move.

In the face of their failure to persuade AF632 to adopt an earnest stance, and the apparent futility of a 'logical' argument in the face of AF632's deaf ears, the surrounding posters stopped addressing AF632 directly. At this point the interactions shifted from attempted pedagogic moves (in terms of apprenticing AF632-as-subject) to an objectification of AF632. The interactions remained pedagogic - as the posters maintained the principles of evaluation of the activity - but now denied AF632 the right to a voice. The following extracts demonstrate this move towards objectifying AF632:

Ultimately i can't see any reason to continuing this thread, AF632 is either stupidly or intentionally missing the point of season five altogether, not to mention the type of show it is overall. (Technopagan, 9 April 2004, 15:59)

Angel Fan enjoys initiating these debates, Plain and simple. Sometimes I think it is entertaining. It at least gives us something to break up the day. I just wish he/she would come up with stronger

cases instead of backtracking every other post. (Rebecca, 9 April 2004, 17:08)

I one of Angel fans MANY traits. He/she likes to start a lot of crap and then never finish it through. I think halfway through each post he/she realizes how idiotic he/she sounds and just gives up until the next pointless attempt to get us to hate Angel. (Rebecca, 10 April 2004, 16:03)

The move from addressing AF632 to talking **about** her/him in this way involved a reduction of the level of subjectivity afforded to the poster (see Dowling, 2001). AF632 dropped out of the conversation shortly after. Whilst excluding AF632, this move also served to bind the group:

“[...] I think this post will finally be over, perhaps AngelFan632 I realized that hes wrong on this one. Good job everyone! That’s a wrap! hehe (I’ve always wanted to say that!)” (Sparticus – Post 74, 10 Apr 2004, 14:42)

This re-established some (albeit temporary) stability – which appeared to be enforced through the regulation of correct/incorrect modes of identification with the text and its creator – therefore a hegemonic fixing of Whedon and exclusion of a poster who has attempted their own hegemonic push. Whilst spelling mistakes are common in the posting activity on the forum for example, members are not usually mocked for this in the way that AF632 was. Here, however, the spelling mistake is recruited as an insult in alliance with the other weaknesses identified within AF632’s posts.

In contrast to SueAngel’s voluntary move to an earnest position in the discussion of *Serenity* in the previous chapter, AF632’s oppositional tenacity here serves as a (continued) irritant to the other posters. Their responses suggest that modes of engagement are governed quite strongly on the site. The suggestion that AF632 should go elsewhere “if you don’t like it” and the resulting objectification/exclusion of this poster from the discourse when they refuse to amend their stance/behaviour, suggests a necessary earnest stance in respect of both the textual object and the fan site (the obligation to be ‘on message’) in order to be granted a legitimate position.

These interactions suggest a reliance on traditional authority, with members working together to exclude a deviant poster. The moderator is not called upon to police the site. The COA rules of use state that it is ok to disagree with another member’s opinions. Here, however, non-legitimate(d) opinions test the limits of this acceptability/openness. Whilst perpetuating an idea of communal policing that appears to go along with the idea of shared responsibility introduced in Section 8.2 - a group of friends excluding a deviant - the fans on COA also reject a challenging of the authority of Whedon (as

God). In doing so, they mark AF632 as unacceptable in a number of ways, and work to shut the poster out of the discussion.

SHH

I suggested earlier that the moderators are more vocal and dominant on the forums of SHH than on COA, where (collective) individual authority is emphasised. Here I want to examine this dominance, by looking at how their authority is realised and also recruited on SHH. In doing so, I also want to examine how regular users exhibit different modes of authority on the site. I will do this by examining two of the threads from the SH4 forum introduced in the last chapter; *Im Disappointed and My Head Hurts*, and *SH4 Venting Area*. Previously I looked at these threads in order to examine fans positioning in relation to *Silent Hill*. I am here concerned with the social ramifications of this conflict and how it is stabilised.

As described in Chapter 7, the first of these threads included a prolonged argument between two posters; Overdose Delusion (critic of SH4) and xx237xx (supporter of SH4). This was expressed in heated debate which descended into an exchange of insults:

Awwww, was the game a little too hard for you? I'm so sorry. Do you want a cookie? (xx237xx 12 Sept 2004, 3:41am)

Obviously you have very low standards when it comes to videogames...oh wait, thats MY opinion. Its also my opinion that this game is crapola. Dig it? [...] I can already see where this is going, geek. But check this factoid out, this is a forum, and I'm posting my opinions....so please don't mock me fuckface. My views are mine, and your views are your own. (Overdose Delusion, 12 Sept 2004, 7:00 am)

You're so full of shit it's coming out of your ears. [...] Again, please try finishing the game before reviewing it. [...] I didn't need to make you look like an idiot. I just pointed out what a bang-up job you did of it on your own. (xx237xx, 12 Sept 2004, 5:09pm)

In the second post Overdose Delusion resists closure, suggesting that it is acceptable to have different opinions. This opens out the possible statements that can be made about the game. In contrast xx237xx is attempting to close down the practice in favour of a positive reading of the game. Both posters are attempting to enforce a specific position in relation to what the discussion can/should entail (via traditional and charismatic moves); thus attempting to fix the practice. Each is deploying claims to traditional authority, and attempting to both persuade and denigrate the other.

Moderator interventions in this thread came at a relatively late stage. In their absence, as on COA, other posters attempted to stem the argument in a variety of ways:

Jeez-us people! It's one thing to have a heated debate, but this is NOT debate. This is typical forum behavior. [...] These are OPINIONS people. Cut it with all the he-said, she-said crap! (witters, 12 Sept 2004, 7:37am)

This poster deploys a range of traditional and charismatic strategies, marking a distinction between “heated debate” and “opinions” in relation to an experience of “typical forum behaviour” which is playfully expressed “Jeez-us people!” In doing so witters reminds posters of their responsibility in posting to the site. The attempt is to regulate the discussion, and halt the current argument.

When two moderators - F and Miss Krissy - intervene they do so threatening to close the thread, and warning users about their behaviour:

Simmer down, everyone. No flame-o-rama or this topic is going to be closed. (F, 15 Sept 2004, 8:15am)

First of all: Watch your self. Those are YOUR opinions, and people get mighty pissed off when you state them in such a way. (Miss Krissy, 15 Sept 2004, 10:45pm)

These responses inspired an apology from Overdose Delusion, who notes:

I just wanna point out for the record that I don't honestly think anybody who likes the game has bad tastes. I stated my opinion and I got jumped on about it, so I responded in kind. I apologize for any flaming that was done, but I don't take arrogance sitting down. (12 Sept 2004, 7:49am)

In this thread, the absence of moderators until a relatively late stage led the members of the site to attempt to halt the conflict. In doing so they demonstrated collaborative traditional authority moves to attempt to regulate the activity by calling for good, responsible, practice. In contrast to the data from COA presented earlier, the acceptability of disagreement (but not harassment) again suggests that SHH is more open than COA to the voicing of opposing and sceptical positions relating to the fan object.

In *SH4 Venting Area*, by contrast, the moderator Miss Krissy is involved from the start. (Miss Krissy, as I mentioned in Chapter 7, opened the topic, marketing it as a thread for “venting” criticisms about the game.) This thread therefore provides an opportunity to explore how the voicing of bureaucratic authority emerges alongside the traditional/charismatic authority claims of regular posters.

Initial arguments in this thread stem from responses to Overdose Delusion, who here continues their criticisms of SH4. Overdose Delusion is challenged in a number of posts by LastGunslinger, who criticises Overdose Delusion's apparent claims to objectivity.¹⁰¹

Overdose, you are not trying to be accurate and factual, you are masturbating to your own delusional belief that you know what the absolute polarity of quality is. [...] (LastGunslinger, 18 Oct 2004, 3:44 am)

[..] The very idea of going to such lengths to prove that you have the definitive view on something so subjective is in itself so counterproductive and moronic that the only way you can save face at this point is just backing down and letting things lie.. (LastGunslinger, 18 Oct 2004, 11:22am)

LastGunslinger's criticisms of Overdose Delusion here are similar to those that AF632 was charged with on COA. The central charge in each case is that the poster is speaking as if their (subjective) opinion is an objective stance from which they can evaluate both the texts and other members' opinions of them. They are therefore being criticised for attempting to close down other poster's opinions from a biased and personal perspective – attempting a pedagogic move in respect of subjective opinion.

As arguments erupt within the thread, a number of posters attempt to get the topic back on track. Some posters defend Overdose Delusion in reference to the logic of the thread (as a space to criticise the game):

[...] this thread is plainly a Silent Hill 4 hater-thread... Why do people with opposing veiwpoints insist on coming in here to argue? There are plenty of other threads discussing the game in a positive manner. Express your wonderful opinions there, please. [...] (blaidrunner, 18 Oct 2004, 6:19am)

People, stop ragging on eachother. After all, we have here, a thread of a perfectly mediocre (perfectly mediocre haho!) game strapped naked to a chair for us dissappointed with it to, as the title reads, vent. (Nosaj, 18 Oct 2004, 12:26pm)

Here blaidrunner and Nosaj are speaking from a position of traditional authority; trying to close down the practice by reminding participants how they should treat each other, and how they should speak (not “ragging”).

In this thread the moderators attempt to control the line of the debate; to organise and delimit the practice both in terms of content and style. Miss Krissy (as well as another moderator F) focuses their attention on the content rather than form of posts; delineating

¹⁰¹ LastGunslinger does not appear to be aware of Overdose Delusion's earlier apology in *Im Disappointed and My head hurts*.

acceptable topics of discussion. Miss Krissy's interventions throughout the thread demonstrate the forthright and confrontational moderating style of this poster:

That's fucking it people. Any more posts attacking anyone else will be DELETED. So keep your goddamn shit comments to yourself. It's not that hard. [...]. (Miss Krissy, 19 Oct 2004, 4:29pm)

Hey, twat. This post has nothing to do with this thread. And I already gave a warning that said any/all posts with no relevance will be shipped to the [Library] Reserve Room. So guess where this is headed? (Miss Krissy, 20 Oct 2004, 1:09am)

The aggressive policing demonstrated here is continued by F in a response to Overdose Delusion:

Is that your answer to Krissy? Get fuckin ready to be banned, motherfucker. [...] SH4 is just one out of way too many subjects in this forum where you go and act like a dork, and we're fucking tired of you being the subject of the week for the staff. Your answer to Krissy sums it up. You know the saying, "when you don't have anything good to say, then say nothing"? That would be a good route for you. [...]Talk about being dense. And disrespectful. And smug. Bye, asshole. Give your last word here if you wish, which will just prove that you're once again--there's more than enough proof around this forum--nothing but an asshole. And your ass has been handed to you by yourself, sucker. (F, 18 Oct 2004, 11:11pm)

F here closes down the practice via the bureaucratic authority they wield; excluding this member ("Get ready to be banned," "Bye, asshole"), and placing the blame on the posters' inability to maintain traditional authority within the site both from this local example of disrespect ("Your answer to Krissy sums it up"), and also from a history of bad behaviour ("just one," "once again"). The expectation of toeing the line is here explicit, the punishment meted out in strong terms.

Along with Miss Krissy's and F's interventions, the authority of moderators is also referenced by other posters. These include those who make reference to their own history of previously being banned by the moderators, and posters who request that the moderators intervene:

[...] the post started out as a venting area, and turned into one big brawl, so closing it would be nice. (Vatnajökull, 19 October 2004, 3:30 am)

The closure of the thread by a moderator in April 2005 inspired the following response from Mista_Proud; "Finally. Thank You" (9 April 2005, 12:25am).

In contrast to the collective regulation of activity (with secondary interventions by SueAngel) on COA, on SHH we have seen how the moderators are a dominant and dominating force, and how their bureaucratic authority is requested by members. Having examined their deployment of bureaucratic and charismatic/traditional

authority, we might reflect back both to the criticisms of the SHH moderators on SHF introduced in Chapter 6, and also to the criticisms of the moderators from within the site's membership. The response of other members, however, suggests that they are necessary to police a large and often unruly population. In Chapter 9, I will examine the moderators' role during a period of upheaval in the aftermath of the release of the *Silent Hill* film.

8.5 HELP-SEEKING ACTIVITY AND EXPERTISE

Having examined some of the strategies by which posters are excluded from interactions, and activity policed on COA and SHH, I am now going to look at the ways in which members of these sites request and receive help. My focus will be on one forum from SHH, *Daddy Help Me!* COA does not have an equivalent forum, although as I will describe, it does house similar activity. In this section, othering and the marking out of hierarchy is considered in relation to appeals to, and identification with, more experienced members by those requiring assistance with gameplay. This demonstrates the subservient positioning that runs alongside more combative activity introduced so far in this chapter.¹⁰²

SUBSERVIENCE AND EXPERTISE IN *DADDY HELP ME!*

“Stuck in a Silent Hill game? Seems like there's no way out? Seek help here...”

(Description of *Daddy Help Me!* on the SHH forum homepage)

If posters on SHH have a question about the site, they (should) post their query on the forum *Silent Hill Post Office*. If they have a question about how to do something in one of the *Silent Hill* games, the place to go is *Daddy Help Me!*, a forum for requesting gameplay support. In some ways, *Daddy Help Me!* can be considered an explicitly pedagogic space. It is devoted to apprenticeship, carrying posters across a lack of ability/knowledge so that they can continue/complete the games. It is not a forum for asking about the meaning or significance of a game event or feature in the series (for this, posters should post in the individual game forums on the site). As well as the institutionalised separation of issues relating to the site (SHH), and issues related to the

¹⁰² Subservience which is to a lesser extent seen in the threads on each site where 'newbies' introduce themselves to the community members.

site's objects of interest (the *Silent Hill* games) suggested by the distinction between the *Silent Hill Post Office* and *Daddy Help Me!* forums, *Daddy Help Me!* also represents another separation. Discussion of the meaning and significance of game chronotope elements (such as the discussion of narrative features etc) is separated from discussion of the techniques by which fans can successfully engage with/negotiate the elements of the game; which, drawing from the term ludology (see Frasca, 2003), we might refer to as the *ludotope*. Discussion of the latter is my focus here.

Activity focuses on achieving a successful game experience in terms of progression within, or total, 'full,' completion of the games; getting different endings, finding all the weapons etc. This tends to involve the posting of questions from members who are stuck at some point. Typical problems addressed include how to kill enemies, how to deal with a lack of ammunition, the location of missing objects necessary for progression, and requests for solutions to puzzles. Whilst posters make reference to the use of supplementary information such as walkthroughs,* an appeal to the site's membership offers the possibility of tailored assistance. Responses to these requests for help see the provision of tactics, answers, and hints by more experienced fans, and the reporting back of successful (or otherwise) completion of tasks.

I suggested that there was not really an equivalent space on COA. However on COA assistance **is** offered, and indeed advertised, as seen on the description of the *COA Codex* forum:

[..] Want to know the name of the episode where Wesley and Angel dance? Is there a song that keeps invading your mind but you don't know the name of it? Ask the CoA Codex an Angel question and the answers will....appear.

However whilst the *Daddy Help Me!* forum is restricted to questions and answers, the *COA Codex* houses a range of topics of discussion. Examples of assistance provided on COA are visible in the thread *Questions, Questions*, opened by a new member (with 3 posts to their name), Moonlight:

[...] I have some questions about Angel (the man (vampire...) himself), first why must he be invite to enter someone's home? What would happen without an invitation? Also he can be hurt, he bruises, but he can't be kill? So far season 2 it's really good. I'm enjoy it very much. Cheers. Isa. (Moonlight, *Questions, Questions*, COA Codex, 9 Oct 2005, 11:58am)

An established poster, bored of the dead, responds:

Doyle sacrified his own life so that Angel didnt have to in an episode called Heroes....then next episode Wesley joins and becomes one of THE most important characters in the show.
first why must he be invite to enter someone's home?

Its part of the Vampire Curse, a Vampire can not enter the home of a Human without being invited.

What would happen without an invitation?

Nothing, he just couldnt enter.

Also he can be hurt, he bruises, but he can't be kill?

He can be killed in the same way other vamps....Decapitation, Wooden stake through the heart, set on fire, exposure to sunlight, drinking a pint of holy water.... (bored of the dead, 9 Oct 2005, 12:47pm)

Such negotiation of textual meaning/significance is examined in the literature on fans which has demonstrated how more difficult, 'open,' or contested questions/issues generate the activity of serial audiences (as discussed in the previous chapter). Such discussion is visible on both COA (e.g. who is the true champion?) and SHH (who is Pyramid Head?) in relation to controversial chronotope issues. In contrast, the sorts of goal-oriented, gameplay related problems presented in *Daddy Help Me!* reflect barriers to the completion of the text. In Espen Aarseth's terms, these barriers are aporias, which he suggests are one of the tropes of the hypertext medium (see Aarseth, 1997, 91). Here, in a similar way, these deny the continuation of the game (the possibility of accessing the next part/level/stage). In contrast, those able to get the episodes of *Angel*, are able to watch them without having to work out how to solve a puzzle or kill an enemy (or Boss*) in order to progress (even though they may not be 'equipped' to recognise all the intertextual references within an episode for example; as Aarseth has also noted, this is another sort of textual play possible for less "interactive" texts).

ASKING FOR HELP: POSITIONING SUBSERVIENCE

The interactions within *Daddy Help Me!* allocate status in terms of traditional authority and expertise. All but one of the threads in my sample from this forum opens with the introduction of a problem or challenge that a poster is unable to surmount, and a request for assistance. Many of the posters enter into this forum stuck, and faced with the threat of having to re-start the game, an unwelcome break out of the chronotope which is the result of their inability to master the ludotope. This can be seen in the following request for advice relating to *Silent Hill 3*:

I desperately need help. I can't defeat the boss because.. well... I only have 4 bullets left! Someone told me that the game supplies you with more ammo in random rooms once you run out. I have gotten rid of my 4 bullets and searched EVERYWHERE for more ammo, but with no luck. So what the hell do I do? I really don't want to start the game again. (HassenMaschine, *Silent Hill 3: Mall*, 10 Jun 2005, 5:09pm)

The introduction of questions and requests to an assumed audience of more experienced and knowledgeable members of the site, involves an immediate separation of those in

need of assistance from those (potentially) able to provide it. The style of these initial posts, which frequently introduce the author as inferior, helpless, and grateful for assistance, marks out the social distance between experienced members and those needing help.

All of these opening posts are (to differing degrees), both reverential and subservient. Consider the style of this opening post, which is, like many others, deferential, and self-depreciating:

Hi, Please help me, Im going crazy! Ive just managed to get out of the hospital in silent hill center. (and DOH, I forgot to watch the tape!! ^^) Anyway, Now im really stuck. I dont have a clue where i should go. Ive been runnin around in this stupid sillent hill center for hoers. The only unlocked door I found where by the policestation, and I couldnt go any further there. (Just some notes and some more locked doors) Where should I go? (bachi, *Totally lost!*, 21 Sept 2005, 8:39am)

Here the use of terms such as the Homer Simpson-esque “DOH,” “im really stuck,” “I don’t have a clue,” suggest inferiority (“should have watched the tape”), and dependency (“where should I go?”).

The appeal to more experienced gamers here - which reflects the suggestion of a higher authority figure in the forum’s title - is seen in another post where a lack of ammunition is causing problems:

i only recently purchased SH3, so it's my first time around playing it... question: i'm at the very first boss, and it seems i have been an idiot and wasted all of my ammo on earlier beasts. i've researched the rest of the area for more bullets, but i can't find any... also, i've been readin some Boss FAQ's for the game around the net, and they say the 'only' way to beat the boss is to shoot it in the mouth... am i now doomed because i cannot fire my gun? or is there another way to beat it?? thanks. (amburr, 5 Jan 2006, 2:03am)

This poster marks an awareness of their own fallibility; even with supplementary resources (FAQs) they are unable to progress. The reference to the FAQ serves to highlight the gamer’s failure to master (or even just continue to play) the game, the provided solution (“shoot it in the mouth”) being impossible to carry out due to lack of care with ammo; “i’m at the very first boss, and it seems i have been an idiot and wasted all of my ammo on earlier beasts.” This reinforces amburr’s position as subordinate, as they need to request additional assistance even after referring to the FAQ.

IDENTIFICATION AND INCREDULITY

The responses to these queries vary. There are, for example, a number of supportive “me too” posts:

I have that problem too [...] I'm starting to wonder whether it is possible or not. (silamai, *Sword of Obedience*, 9 July 2005, 5:35am)

[...] I had exactly the same problem as you, the first time I played it on normal. If you can't find any more ammo your best is probably to start again; as was said, avoid the enemies whenever you can, especially the Closers. (Icewater, *Silent Hill 3 Mall*, 13 Jun 2005, 12:39pm)

In these two extracts, the posters identify with the predicament being faced (as they are also experiencing, or have experienced, the same problems). This differs from distancing moves which construct more sceptical positions in relation to the plight of the gamer (both literally and in the way I am using this term in the modes of engagement schema). For example, scepticism relating to the position that the gamer has got themselves into:

I just thought it was wierd that you had used all the bullets before the boss figth, but i don't know how hard it is on normal. Anyway, you should probably start avoiding the monsters more, rather than shooting them. The Closers (tall monsters with the big arms) are easely avoided, but takes a lot of ammo. Oh, and go back to the 1F toilet an look around some more in there. (Dane, *Silent Hill 3 Mall*, 12 June 2005, 3:29pm)

Here the poster is incredulous about the stated lack of ammunition, but prepared to acknowledge the possible differences when playing on different levels (easy, normal, or hard). Similar expressions of surprise are voiced in two other posts (the first of which relates to the location of a shoe, an item needed for progression in SH3; the second requesting a tactic for killing enemies without any ammo in SH2):

[You will find the shoe in the] Same area where you found the chain... which you had to find to even get this far. Funny, because the shoe is much more obvious and easy to find than the chain was. (alone in the town – *bit stuck in silent Hill*, 12 Jun 2005, 12:45pm)

Really, you have no handgun or shotgun ammo, wow. You can always restart and use melee weapons for the easier enemies and save ammo, thats what I did, also, is this your first time through? cause when you complete the game, you can double your ammo intake, then triple and so on. I don't think you can kill them with the steelpipe before they kill you. (GioGio, *Stuck in Silent Hill 2*, 6 Apr 2005, 6:31pm)

As in the previous post, the use of the expressions such as “Funny, because [...],” and “Really [...] Wow,” in these two responses involves the voicing of surprise at the situation that those seeking help have got themselves into. These posters are here marking out sceptical positions in relation to the game play experience which is being reported; this appears to go against their idea of the “straightforward” elements of the

game. This serves to distance them from those they are assisting and can be seen to mark a rupturing of identification with these members.

FORMS OF ASSISTANCE AND EXPERTISE

Due to the stated purpose of the forum as a space for requesting and receiving assistance, and the nature of the questions posed in *Daddy Help Me!*, it is perhaps unsurprising that many of the responses to opening questions typically involve attempts to apprentice members – posters producing solutions to the problem introduced, attempting to carry the gamer across the difficulty they are facing. The style of this tutoring differs however. Often the same problem/question inspires the provision of a range of hints, explanations and resources (including the provision of links to walkthroughs/FAQs).

One key difference is similar to that made above between those who identify with and distance themselves from the help-seeking posters. This is a difference between those who recontextualise their own gameplay - sharing their own personal gaming experiences with the site - and those who present more distanced, ‘ideal’ solutions. This can be illustrated via reference to two answers to the same question (a request for a code to enter a room (the morgue) in SH3). One poster, Remedy, provides the following hints and advice:

The password is never the same, just keep a look at the beds and the colour of the digits. I used a long time to crack that code, it feels good when you get it. The digit 7 is always in the code.
(Remedy, *SH3 help in the hospital when you're in morgue*, 22 Sept 2005, 11:48pm)

The sharing of personal narratives here sees Remedy aligning with the person posing the question (they too faced this problem, this is how they solved it). However, this is only to a certain extent, as Remedy has managed to get beyond this point and therefore speaks from position of greater expertise than the stuck poster. Another member answers the question in a different way:

The grid represents the placement of the bodies in the mortuary. The top represents “north” placement and the bottom the “south” area of the room. If the roman numeral III was marked in the top left corner of the diagram, you would look in the top left corner of the room to see which body is located there (in the above example, say that this number would be “1”), and the number attached to this body would be the third number in the four digit code to get the cremated key.
(plastique-nouveau, 2 Sept 2005, 1:45am)

Plastique-nouveau presents a more ‘professionalised’ and less sentimentalised stance in their help-giving, which distances them from the normal poster by presenting a full answer, explaining the process of solving the puzzle.

As seen in these two examples, posters may provide more or less information – providing a partial or totalising answer (this also relates to the nature of the problem).¹⁰³ This variety is seen in the responses to the following plea from a member unable to solve a hang rope puzzle in SH3:

im stuck onm a room where you have to pull hang ropes.. I have done a lot of combinations y nothing.. I cant pass that.. (aljonz, *hang rope puzzle*, 28 Mar 2005, 3:43am)

Having tried to discern the level that aljonz is playing at, a range of responses are provided. One poster scaffolds the activity by providing a partial answer, which suggests they do not want to spoil the puzzle by providing the answer:

In the room ahead it speaks of something along the lines of one criminal being innocent, the child was not found, such and such. Each corpse has a paper on their face, stating the crimes they were accused. I'm not telling you the answer, but find which crime would have to do with a child being missing, then match that rope up into the other room and pull it. (Hometown, 28 Mar 2005, 3:55am)

In contrast, another member provides the solutions, reducing them to the essential elements:

EASY MODE: The kidnapper is innocent
NORMAL MODE: The Arsonist is innocent.
HARD MODE: The Counterfeiter is innocent.
(Vinc3ntV, 21 Apr 2005, 2:49pm)

Here the manner by which answers are provided and the nature of the assistance/exposition clearly has an impact on the way that the game is experienced. The possibility of providing the equivalent of the television spoiler is suggested in these posts (which Aarseth terms the sudden revelation of “epiphany” – the other trope of hypertext (Aarseth, 1997, 91). Like spoiler activity, this question-and-answer discussion involves the negotiation of approaches to the games-as-text; there is a similar notion of the establishing and control of playing formations (see Williams 2004 on the television-related equivalent). Thus Hometown and Vinc3ntV are potentially involved in the authoring of the gaming experience.

¹⁰³ This can be related to Vygotskian approaches to learning and what Jerome Bruner terms “scaffolding” (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976), a connection that has been made by other scholars of online videogame fandom (Schott, 2003). The focus here is on performance rather than competence however.

As well as these more or less partial/complete answers, posters also present varying demonstrations of their knowledge of the games as they provide assistance. One thread *Have Questions? I Got Answers* sees a poster taking a somewhat different approach to the posters above by advertising their services (rather than responding to queries). The thread is opened with the following post:

Hello, I'm Incubus. I do not mean to brag, but recently I have completed all of the Silent Hills, 1 to 4, in their entirety and have read about them very thoroughly. I'm here to offer my helpful services to any who just don't want to consult a complete walkthrough or just don't know where to find them. Riddles, Secrets, Strategies for Bosses... you name it and, if it is in my power, I'll help in the best way I can. I have also compiled a very large amount of Plot Analysis data, so if you have questions about the horrible Pyramid Head, the mysterious Valtiel, the terrifying Incubus, the ways of Walter Sullivan, or the mysteries of Silent Hill in general, I'm here to help. Please note that these are educated theories garnered from several factual information of Silent Hill, and ask at the risk of your sanity; most of these are very psychological, philosophical, and complex. (Incubus, 4 June 2005 12:31pm)

In presenting her/himself as an all-knowing expert who can deal with any query, Incubus here sets forward a strong traditional authority claim. Zarrie Guns, who replies, is dubious about how popular the thread will be:

[...] somehow I don't think this thread is gonna get any business....its better to go and look for help in here (Zarrie Guns, 4 June 2005, 1:22pm)

This prediction appears to be borne out by the fact that the thread only contains three posts, two of which are posted by Incubus. Here, again, is perhaps evidence of the importance of maintaining one's 'proper station' in these forums. The idea that there are approved ways of obtaining authority, that expertise is earned not claimed resonates with Vixx's discussion of how to become 'noticed' rather than offering your services. Without being affirmed by either bureaucratic position or the recognition of other members, this poster - who explicitly puts themselves forward as an expert - is ignored.

THE ADVERSARY

One of the members of the site who is certainly successful in their establishment of an aura of expertise, who perhaps most frequently presents 'guaranteed' solutions, and whose strategies for successful playing/completion are cited by others, is the The Adversary. Like Miss Krissy, The Adversary is a moderator who has on occasion been criticised for their behaviour on the boards. The charges levelled at these moderators have differed, however: whilst some posters have denounced Miss Krissy for using aggressive and/or explicit language, The Adversary has been charged with claiming absolute knowledge in relation to *Silent Hill*, and described by some as a divisive and domineering influence on the site. Complaints about (and irreverence towards) *The*

Adversary - who at one point had the title “High Priest [Like a Surgeon]” - are absent in *Daddy Help Me!* Here, The Adversary appears able to maintain a secure position of influence and authority. The Adversary posts in seven of the threads that I have looked at from this forum,¹⁰⁴ and as well as intervening him/herself, is cited by a number of other posters.

The citing and discussion of The Adversary can, for example, be seen in the thread *Maria Can't Run*, which opens with berk47 asking the following question:

I'm at the last part of Brookhaven Hospital in SH2 where you're running from Pyramid Head. I'm playing it in hard mode, and it seems like everytime the camera switches down another hallway and I lose sight of Maria, she gets shanked by PH. I've tried blasting him with the shotgun to keep him back, but it doesn't work to any affect. How do I stop Maria from getting killed(too early)? (berk47, 30 Dec 2005, 11:39pm)

The moderator Miss Krissy responds by reposting an answer from another thread:

[...] the Adversary wrote:

Uh-huh. But, like I said: There's a very simple method that I assure, 100%, will keep you alive for the entire hallway. Guaranteed. At the first turn, put yourself between the red pyramid thing & Maria. Fire seven to ten rounds at it with the handgun--be sure to count. Quick spin, and run to the far side of the fenced-area. Go into the menu, reload the handgun automatically. Maria will run past the fence; the r.p.h. will follow. Fire another seven to ten rounds at it--be sure to count. Quick spin, run to the exit. Guaranteed, one try. Hopefully this helps! Good luck. (Miss Krissy, 31 Dec 2005, 5:03am)

Here we can see The Adversary marketing his “very simple method that I assure, 100%, will keep you alive,” “Guaranteed, one try.” The Adversary’s post has, however, been re-contextualised, recruited by Miss Krissy as a resource to help out berk47. The introduction of a solution by The Adversary can therefore be seen a pedagogic move, but one which involves displaced authority; authority shifts from the speaker to the referenced authority figure. This shift is supported through the references to The Adversary’s expertise in the posts that follow:

Again, as Krissy stated, read what Adversary wrote. The man's beaten the game like 60 times and knows his shit! [...] (emptimass, 31 Dec 2005, 12:16pm)

It takes a precise pattern and cunning witt to execute the strategy provided by The Adversary. 3 years ago? Come on. You can do it again. (emptimass, 31 Dec 2005, 12:32pm)

It may take some time to get the hang of it but, according to teh Adversary, this works. Next time you play the game on hard you could try it out of you'd like. I think you have to follow those exact instructions--five to seven rounds, hitting whatever buttons activate the "quick turn" on your controller--and all that stuff, so. Yeah. (Krist, 31 Dec 2005, 3:31pm)

¹⁰⁴ *Music Room Poem, (SH2) Final Boss, I be stuck in SH4 Apartment world 1st time, Final Boss?, Toilet in SH4, Blue Gem, UFO Ending, Maria Cant run.*

Here we can see the reverential celebration of The Adversary as an expert gamer through the comments relating to both The Adversary's ability ("The man's beaten the game like 60 times and knows his shit!"), faith in the trustworthiness of the solution ("according to the Adversary, this works"), and the skilled nature of the approach ("It takes a precise pattern and cunning wit to execute the strategy provided by The Adversary").

The naming and reification of The Adversary in this way can be contrasted to the moves to objectify misbehaving posters in Section 2. Here we also have the citing of, and talking about, a member of the forum in a way which serves to separate them from the group but here it is in positive rather than negative terms. In contrast to the objectification of AF632, the use of The Adversary's name in the posts above signals traditional authority and elevated status within the community.

In the posts above, this signalling can be seen to involve the attributing of inferior status to those addressed ("It takes a precise pattern[...] Come on you can do it again," "you have to follow those exact instructions"). There is also the possibility that this sort of reference would involve the speaker positioning themselves as inferior to The Adversary; they are not presenting their own strategy/solution but citing a 'higher' authority. There is of course, also the possibility that they might gain some reflected kudos from the fact that they have read the posts that they are citing whereas the person asking the question has not.

Related to this, it should be noted that empitmass's post above cites both Miss Krissy and The Adversary. This demonstrates the difference in moderator style/authority (which the Adversary carries over into other business (see Chapter 9)). Miss Krissy is also respected, but referenced in terms their (bureaucratic) position, rather than in terms of traditional authority. The Adversary's traditional authority can here be considered as being established in reference to the *esoteric domain* practice on SHH (Dowling, in press). Here I am referring to Dowling's distinction between *esoteric* and *public domain* areas of practice (ibid) that I introduced briefly in Chapter 5. These refer to the strength by which content and expression are institutionalised. "Esoteric domain" practices are strongly insitutionalised; "formal modes of expression [...] and content" (ibid). In

contrast, “public domain” practices are weakly institutionalised and recontextualised from other practices:

The *esoteric domain* consists of discourse, which is strongly marked out from other areas of practice and contrasts with the *public domain* which is weakly marked out. (Dowling, in press).

In these terms, apprenticeship can be seen to involve a movement into the esoteric domain. Areas such as school science and mathematics, Dowling argues, constitute esoteric domains that are strongly institutionalised with “language deployed with a high degree of regularity” (ibid). Specialised esoteric domain practice within fan sites such as SHH and COA would involve those regions of the activity which are most obviously related to *Silent Hill* or *Angel* – relating to the interpretation or theorising of the texts (in contrast to, for example, personal musings/responses to the texts recruiting external/alternative referents). In the posts above, The Adversary is being positioned in relation to the esoteric domain on SHH by members of the site. This sets this moderator apart from others with bureaucratic authority. As one member of the site says to The Adversary; “All mods have the same powers. We all worship you because your mind is sexy” (Alone in the town, *Too Much Modding*, Sat 03 Dec 2005 8:34am).

As well as looking at how s/he is cited, we can see how The Adversary adopts a traditional authoritative stance, positioning his/herself within the esoteric domain through their style of posting, the way s/he wields authority/knowledge, and attempts to train the (less knowledgeable) subjects who have asked for help. In the process, the ‘myth’ of The Adversary as expert develops from her/his own style of posting, the instruction s/he provides, and the ways that s/he is spoken about. This can be seen, for example, in the thread *Blue Gem UFO Ending*, which opens with the question “... Can somebody tell me where I have to use the blue gem at?” (Brian, 21 Dec 2005, 10:29pm).

The Adversary responds:

Brookhaven Hospital's [otherside] garden, immediately following the battle with the Patients. On the dock, before you get in the boat. In Lakeview Hotel, room 312, standing by the windows, before you put the tape into the VCR. (21 Dec 2005, 11:53am)

Brian replies:

“Wait... Isn't there uhh... I thought I only had to use it in -3- places...?”

To which *The Adversary* responds:

You might want to count again...

- 1) Brookhaven Hospital's [otherside] garden, immediately following the battle with the Patients.
- 2) On the dock, before you get in the boat.
- 3) In Lakeview Hotel, room 312, standing by the windows, before you put the tape into the VCR.
(The Adversary, 22 Dec 2005, 1:13am)

Brian apologies, and asks an additional, related question:

lmao... Yeah, that was pretty stupid of me. Thanks. Is this ending a necessity to get Reveal Signs?
(Brian, 22 Dec 2005, 1:28am)

The Adversary responds:

It would be if that were possible. It's not though. Never was. It was a feature implemented in the Beta version of the game--with which Dan Birlew wrote the Official BradyGames Strategy Guide--but was removed for the final release. (The Adversary, 22 Dec 2005, 1:33am)

The scope and range of references in this final post serve as markers of traditional authority, demonstrating familiarity/knowledge of the history of the game and authorship of the strategy guide which is not available for popular consumption. This serves to underline The Adversary's expertise. The Adversary utilises what Galegher et al (1998) refer to as rhetoric of professional rather than personal experience; when making reference to her/his own personal experience s/he does so in the rhetoric of theory-testing (to guarantee that it works), rather than sharing personal experience. The answers therefore remain within the esoteric rather than public domain. The Adversary's tone in the posts above also suggest the somewhat autocratic style that this member takes (which is pretty consistent across different forums/topics of discussion¹⁰⁵), particularly when those being assisted (the less experienced) fail to pay attention. This can also be seen in the following exchanges from the same thread:

Adversary -just- stated that it isn't possible to unlock "reveal signs". Homies, you can't get it.
(Brian, 23 Dec 2005, 7:52am)

Yep. Like I always say: No one reads. It would be if that were possible. It's not though. Never was. It was a feature implemented in the Beta version of the game--with which Dan Birlew wrote the Official BradyGames Strategy Guide--but was removed for the final release. (The Adversary, 23 Dec 2005, 6:59pm)

Yeah the UFO and the dog.I have 7 endings I think.I have all of them,but do I start a new game or do I continue on from the last game I played? (Harrys_Girl, 25 Dec 2005, 6:08am)

To do what? btw, there're six endings. Please GOD sweet baby Jesus, don't tell me that you're asking "what do I do to get reveal signs?". Is that what you're asking? ... (Brian, 25 Dec 2005, 6:46am)

¹⁰⁵ Such consistency is demonstrated by other moderators, particularly Miss Krissy who has been vocal in the data I have examined.

I don't think she's read Adversary's posts. (Dr. Loomis, 25 Dec 2005, 6:54am)

READ: It would be if that were possible. It's not though. Never was. It was a feature implemented in the Beta version of the game--with which Dan Birlew wrote the Official BradyGames Strategy Guide--but was removed for the final release. Bold'd, italiciz'd, points & fucking fingers at it!, typed s l o w l y for e m p h a s i s. (The Adversary, 25 Dec 2005, 7:40am)

Here Brian – the original poster, can be seen joining in with the ganging up on Harrys_Girl (despite himself misreading posts in the opening exchanges with The Adversary). The Adversary's voicing of traditional authority is evident through both generalising and sarcasm: "Like I always say: No one reads" "typed s l o w l y for e m p h a s i s." In the final post in this exchange The Adversary re-posts an extract from one of their earlier posts, apparently in frustration that her/his message hasn't got across.

In contrast to Incubus, who unsuccessfully marketed their knowledge of *Silent Hill*, The Adversary's authority can be seen to be established from the recognition of their traditional authority and expertise by other members. On this forum, the demonstration of knowledge and provision of assistance to others - rather than simply stating claims to authority - produces the reputation which attributes status to this member.

8.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have focused on the varied strategies by which authority is asserted and challenged on the forums of COA and SHH. In contrast to work which describes the already established hierarchies within fandom, the analysis presented here has considered the social negotiation of status as part of ongoing community formation, and suggested the complexity of authority relations within these fan sites. The chapter has also demonstrated how the play of authority relates to the maintenance of the earnest mode of identification both in relation to the fan objects and the sites.

In the previous chapter the establishing of temporary points of stability/agreement - in terms of, for example, the privileging of particular modes of nostalgic identification with the object texts – involved the configuring of the fan objects within posting activity. In this chapter I have explored the strategic establishing of hierarchy which involves similar points of in/stability. This appears to mark out specific individuals for

special attention (whether good or bad). By examining authority as emergent and strategic, involved in the formation of hierarchy at an interactional level, I have explored the ways in which practice is regulated and closed down, as well as the exclusion of de-legitimated positions within the setting. Just as the requests for assistance presented sees posters marking themselves as subservient and inadequate, the establishing of an ‘executive fan’ such as *The Adversary*, involves differentiating moves that repeatedly serve to mark out positions between posters.

The stabilising strategies demonstrated here serve to regulate and police the acceptability of practice within these sites. Within these ‘informal’ settings posters clearly inhabit/enact positions of authority typically attributed to formal pedagogic sites and activities. In their study of the *Buffy* site The Bronze, Gatson and Zweerink (2004), noted the difficulty of dealing with ‘bezoar’¹⁰⁶ posters (a term which is also used on SHH); describing how members often resorted to moving out of public spaces of the site to closed spaces where the bezoars could not follow in order to escape them. In this chapter I have described how members of COA and SHH face such posters, working to close down and exclude oppositional or deviant practices via a range of moves. The pedagogic regulation of practice in this way, and the shift from apprenticeship to objectification which serves to exclude the ‘bad’ posters, is interesting as Internet settings and fan communities are frequently configured as being engaged with exchange modes of relation.

Tensions between the organisational power and patterns of participation are visible in both COA and SHH, but these tensions reveal themselves differently on the two sites. In the previous chapter I examined the maintenance of earnest positions in respect of object on COA. In this chapter, I would suggest that in relation to authority, whilst interactions on COA on one level may appear less hostile and more ‘democratic’ than those on SHH, examining posting activity from the site reveals a similarly powerful closing down via collective processes of exclusion. Whilst these moves are less overtly ‘aggressive’ than the moderation on SHH, they work to reject and exclude. The reliance on moderators demonstrated on SHH, which marks a difference with COA, may relate to the size and level of membership of the communities; SHH being busier than COA

¹⁰⁶ Those who in contrast to “sincere newbies” are interlopers “who seems bent on pushing the boundaries of, or indeed breaking up, the community at some level.” (Gatson and Zweerink, 2004, 147).

and having more ‘traffic’ to handle. Consideration of this will be continued in the next chapter, where the aftermath of the release of the *Silent Hill* film saw the overstretching of moderators in the face of increased levels of posting activity/membership, and requests from members for the moderators to clean up the forums.

A relationship can also be suggested between particular activities and the privileging of different modes of authority. This can be illustrated in relation to the data presented from SHH. On *Daddy Help Me!*, for example, the traditional authority of experts is celebrated (perhaps unsurprisingly due to the nature of the forum). Requests for pedagogic assistance here are tied to the establishing of subservient positions, this reinforcing the in-equalities between members via experience of the text. In contrast to the focus on traditional authority and knowledge of the esoteric domain in this forum, elsewhere on SHH, at points of conflict and confrontation, the very ‘real’ bureaucratic power of moderators is valued and called for (although, as discussed, it also generates some hostility). In the next chapter, where discussion is more open (particularly in respect of discussion of the *Silent Hill* film in the run up to the film’s release), we will see attempts to claim status via traditional but also charismatic moves.

CHAPTER 9: ON BEING A FAN: THE REPRESENTATION OF FAN IDENTITY IN DISCUSSION OF THE “SAVE ANGEL” CAMPAIGN AND THE SILENT HILL FILM

9.1 INTRODUCTION

In this final analysis chapter I want to turn from the consideration of positioning in relation to fan objects and internal community relations in the previous two chapters, to what it means, in more abstract terms, to ‘be a fan’ on the forums of COA and SHH. More specifically, I will examine how members of these two sites constitute themselves as fans, and in doing so, how they constitute the other(s).

In doing so I want to refer back to the two key distinctions identified in relation to the strategic formation of fan identity in Chapter 5. I will argue that posters on COA and SHH also work to differentiate themselves from a denigrated ‘other’ configured in terms of ‘the mainstream’ and its consumers. In contrast to Hills’ description of “textual agency” in his study of the performance of fan identity - how horror fans engage with the “discursive ‘warding off’ of affect” (Hills, 2005, 91) by privileging “their ability to do things with horror, rather than discursively framing their encounter with the horror genre as one of being affected by it” (ibid) - I will suggest that on both sites we see fans marking their sentimental, and earnest, closeness to the text. Such moves have already been introduced in my discussion of SH4 in chapter 7 where posters noted the importance of ‘being scared’ to their enjoyment of the text, and on COA in the earnest responses to criticisms of Joss Whedon and *Serenity*.

The analysis of the construction of fan identity within COA and SHH presented in this chapter focuses on discussion of two of the destabilising events I have already introduced: the 2004 cancellation of *Angel* – which resulted in the pronounced activism of the campaign to “Save Angel” – and the 2006 release of the *Silent Hill* film. Each event was significant as a challenge to fan identity, as each involved a recontextualisation of the fan text/practice into new and more public settings.

In Chapters 7 and 8 I introduced data relating to these two events, but asked different questions of it. In Chapter 7 I examined *Angel* fans’ evaluations of the legitimacy of the

closure that the final episodes of the series provided. In Chapter 8 this same event was discussed in relation to members' responses to AF632's readings of Joss Whedon's culpability for the cancellation. In these chapters I also discussed the development of posting activity relating to the *Silent Hill* film on SHH. My interest in this final analysis chapter is in the fans' defence of their activity in relation to these two events; how they work to define what it is to be a fan within these settings, and, in doing so, how they distinguish their activity/objects from other popular audiences and texts. Drawing on the analysis presented in the previous chapters, towards the end of this chapter I will argue that notions of good/bad fandom sometimes conflict with notions of good/bad membership within the sites.

This writing focuses on the deployment of two key strategies involved in the formation of identity in these sites: the fans' portrayal of their own agency, and their objectification of the other. Each of these strategies can be tied back to issues already raised in the thesis. In Chapter 2 I described the development and influence of Fiske's active audience model within fan studies, and how by emphasising the productivity and agency of fans, researchers had challenged negative characterisations of fans as passive victims and cultural dupes. The concept of agency was also tied into my discussion of othering in Chapter 5. Here I am specifically referring to the configuration of fan identity via the marking out of cultural distinctions; in contrast to (for example) the deviant notion of the "bad consumer" (Hills, 2002). In this chapter, these same sorts of distinctions and emphasis will be seen to be invoked by members of COA and SHH.

In Chapter 8 the concept of 'othering' was introduced in relation to the formation of hierarchy within the sites; the strategies by which members mark out identifications with, and alienations from, each other. In discussion of the *Angel* campaign and *Silent Hill* film, we see similar moves towards - and more importantly here, away from - other positions. The moves I am examining in this chapter are, however, based on value judgements about external sites of popular practice, and other media texts. The analysis therefore presents a different slant on the posters' conceptualisation of their own 'identity' as fans and media consumers within a broader context than has been presented in the previous chapters.

In order to highlight the similarities and differences between the two settings I will move between events and sites in my discussion of these two strategies (the fans' portrayal of their agency and of external others). I will begin, however, by providing some contextual information relating to the "Save Angel" campaign and the *Silent Hill* film; this is necessary to understand the issues that the events raised and how they served to destabilise the activity on COA and SHH. A brief description of the two events and the 'recontextualisation' they represented will thus be provided in the next section. I will then turn to the posting activity to examine the particular ways that the characteristics of what it is to be (and not be) a fan is configured in discussion of the two events. The chapter will end with a footnote to these events. With reference to COA this will take us back to where I began in Chapter 6 (the closure of the forums). With reference to SHH this will consider the challenges that the forums are currently facing. I will suggest that the differing configurations of fan identity as performed on these sites can be related both to the fan objects and to contextual factors which can be seen to impact upon the 'health' of the fandom, particularly the sustainability of the external production of the fans' favoured texts.

9.2 THE RECONTEXTUALISATION OF FAN OBJECTS/PRACTICE

Both the "Save Angel" campaign and the release of the *Silent Hill* film represented an extension of the reach and visibility of the fan objects of COA and SHH. Each event involved a range of shifts which transposed the fan objects and interests into new sites and activities. However, the substantive differences between the two events meant that the recontextualisation involved was not the same in each case. The events introduced a range of challenges for fans to negotiate, and were set within different moves within the popular sphere, the details of which are worth briefly summarising.

The cinema release of *Silent Hill* and related publicity campaign resulted in increased visibility for the *Silent Hill* title (in terms of press and television coverage, movie posters and trailers etc), and a textual extension across different mediums (as was discussed in Chapter 7). It also involved a shift in context of reception and audience, which introduced the possibility of watching a *Silent Hill* text with a mass audience. This involved a move from predominantly private, domestic spaces, to public sites of reception. More than any of the other merchandise and marketing surrounding the

Silent Hill games, the film made *Silent Hill* accessible and visible to a larger (and potentially different type of) audience. My own awareness of the publicity campaign for the film in the run up to the release date of 21st April 2006, for example, was fuelled by a range of media. This included *Silent Hill* film posters at bus stops and on the underground, TV trailers, and film trailers at the cinema. The publicity was spread over a range of contexts: settings which were different from those in which I would normally come into contact with the series.

A range of anxieties surrounding the film were voiced on the SHH forums. These included the loss of control of setting, of audience, and fear of a move into the ‘mainstream,’ along with potential challenges to the borders and membership of SHH itself. Possible advantages of the release voiced included the possibility of meeting other *Silent Hill* fans at the cinema, and the opportunity to indoctrinate a wider interested audience. In the run-up to the release of the film, anticipation outweighed concerns. In the period following the release, as I will discuss later, anxiety about the impact of the film on the organisation and workings of the site dominated the posting activity.

In contrast to the enforced recontextualisation of *Silent Hill* by the producers of the film, the “Save Angel” campaign represented an attempt by fans to generate and harness publicity.

The image of fans as defenders of their objects has been perpetuated by both popular and academic discussion of fan campaigns; for example Jenkins on the *Star Trek* letter writing campaign (1992), the description of *Dark Shadows* fans successfully bringing about new versions of the series (Benshoff, 1992), and Tate and Allen’s (2000) description of how *Due South* fans used the Internet to save their show from cancellation. However, the influence of fans has also been questioned. Thomas Austin notes that, along with consumerist ideologies:

Rhetorics that champion notions of audience agency and customer sovereignty need to be properly scrutinised and queried through academic study, not reproduced and legitimated (Austin, 2002, 2)

Existing work has demonstrated the move from fans as a section of a larger audience to their becoming their own commercially exploitable niche audience (Hills, 2002, also Williamson, 2005, 115). The recruitment of fan practices in the name of corporate

interests has also been explored; for example the development of a fan community in the viral marketing of the *AI* game (Whiteman, 2001); the strength of corporate control of the Internet (Consalvo, 2003a); and work on the “assiduous cultivation of Tolkein fandom” by the film production company New Line (Murray, 2004). The configuration of fan influence in this work is therefore positioned in different ways – as able to bring about change and sustain shows, or as holding anxious and sometimes explicitly manipulated positions within larger impermeable structures. These positions resonate with how fans present their own influence in their own words.

The COA campaign aimed to follow other successful fan campaigns by securing another season for *Angel*, or at least by bringing about a new spin-off series and thus securing the future of the Whedonverse.* Members of COA joined the efforts of other sites established specifically in the name of the cause - such as www.saveangel.org – and became involved a variety of activities designed to attract interest and raise awareness. These included letter and postcard writing campaigns, petitions, a food drive, a (vampire-appropriate) blood drive, the placing of adverts in *Daily Variety*, the renting of billboard advertisements, a demonstration in Los Angeles, and the raising of \$13,000 for charity which was presented to Mutant Enemy (Whedon’s production company) in the name of *Angel*. In comparison to *Silent Hill*’s commercial marketing campaign, the ‘publicness’ of the “Save Angel” campaign was relatively contained to more specialist and restricted sites/media. Coverage of the campaign was found predominantly within the media, both within online journalism, tv and fan press, on US networks such as *E!online*, and in genre television magazines such as *SFX* and *Dreamwatch*.¹⁰⁷ The extension of the reach of the text successfully generated press coverage, if not ultimately saving the show.

The fans’ attempts to extend the visibility of their fan object goes against the notion of cult/fan audiences as concerned with exclusivity (see the next section). It could be argued that their desire for publicity was a tactical and resistant move, an attempt to harness the media in order to generate support for a reprieve. However, this move was forced upon the fans by the unwanted cancellation of the series, and became tied into the WB’s publicising of the final episodes of the series. In terms of the hopes and fears

¹⁰⁷ This coverage was to filter into mainstream news websites, e.g. Keveney, 2004.

it carried, the fans' belief that pressure on producers might lead them to grant *Angel* a stay of execution, was set against potential fear that 'failure' would demonstrate that fan agency, no matter how loud or visible, might not be able to change the fate of a loved television show. It was also clear that, as well as marking the end of the series, the failure of the campaign would also have a substantive negative impact on COA. As I write, COA is still online, but the forums, as described in Chapter 6, are now closed.

In examining the discussion of these two events within the posting activity on the COA and SHH forums, I will begin by considering the fans' representation of their own agency in these sites. I then move to examining their construction and objectification of external threats. Finally, I will examine how conceptualisations of fan agency and of the external other are recruited when this other enters the activity on these sites (here the focus is on internal challenges). This final section is designed to make explicit the relation between fans' portrayal of their own roles and activities and the analysis presented in the previous chapters. It reveals the complex ways in which posters on the forums load their conceptualisations of self-identity with meaning, and suggests potential discrepancies between idealised fan identities and the negotiation of acceptable performances of membership within the sites.

9.3 THE REPRESENTATION OF AGENCY ON COA AND SHH

In this section, I want to argue that in each site the posters on the forums generate, and work to maintain and stabilise, a mythologised sense of their own agency. Like Hills' focus on the performance of agency, my use of the term 'mythologise' here does not seek to deny or confirm the possibility that fans might actually 'have' agency. Whether - or how - they do is not the question I am seeking to answer. My interest instead is in how the posters configure and market (or, in political terms, 'spin') their own activity and influence, and in doing so how they mark out conceptualisations of their own identities as fans.

In each case, being agentic - specifically, more agentic than other consumer and audience groups - is presented as a central aspect of being a fan. However the particular characteristics of how this agency is configured - and with it how the nature of fan identity on these sites is established - differs between these two settings. I will suggest

that the ways in which these characteristics relate to the *Angel* and *Silent Hill* texts appears to support existing work on how fans emulate their objects in construction of the imaginary or “rhetorical vision” (Saarinen, 2002) of their communities. At the same time, however, the health of the fan object and the pressures that this places on the sites as working environments also emerges as a key influence within the posts.

COA

In discussion of the “Save Angel” campaign, being a fan is configured as an ethical undertaking, a responsibility to act to protect *Angel*. This is aligned with a belief in the fans’ own ‘real’ potential to bring about change, fuelled both by previously successful campaigns, but also by the words of Joss Whedon and other cast and crew members from the show, whose appeals to the fans and voicing of optimism are fed into the forum in the form of extracts from interviews.

This moralising, optimism, and belief in fan agency, can be seen in examples of what may be considered as ‘cheerleading’ activity, working to ensure the consistency of the fan effort. Consider the following rallying cry, which presents examples of various forms of supportive activity, and emphasises the need to act:

Please listen and do. It will work and we will win. We MUST FIGHT for the shows we want. We are the people and the people have to win. Look at the declaration of independence. They are ruling us. It is wrong. We must fight and fight back hard as you can. This is ANGEL, do not let him down. [...] if you love the shows we always watch, then you must fight. Everyone I know has signed that petition, and all the others, I have made everyone I know put money in to help the cause. Now it is up to us. FIGHT BACK! Shut them down, until they give us our shows back. There are only a few left now. They are still winning right now. So get the heck up and shut off those TV;s (Debbie, *Wake Up People!!!!*)

Here we see a statement of affiliation and belief in the ‘profession’ of being a fan and the responsibilities that (good) fans bear. *Angel* must not be betrayed. This responsibility is presented as a shared activity, as collective endeavour, marked again by appeals to the collective ‘we’ of *Angel* fans and COA members. A collective ‘us’ versus ‘them’ division separates the defenders of the show from the ‘powers that be.’

The collective nature of this agency appears to mimic the collective effort of “Team Angel” in the *Angel* series. Commonality between the realisation of fan identity and the nature of different fan objects has been suggested by Steven Bailey (2002, 2005) who suggests that the characteristics of the online fan cultures surrounding the animated

television series *Futurama* emulate the values of the series. On COA the central issue of ‘helping the helpless’ can be directly related to the series. This is the motto of Angel Investigations, the detective agency that Angel heads.¹⁰⁸ Despite characters’ undoubted moments of weakness, the series is driven by earnest belief in the heroes’ strength of character in the face adversity (this is also the case in *Buffy* and *Firefly*). Thread discussions such as *Why we fight* make explicit references to the series (*Why We Fight*” is the title of the 13th episode of Season 5 of *Angel*) reinforcing the connection between fan activity and object. This influence is also visible in the campaign propaganda, www.savingangel.org describing how charity donations are “once again reaffirming our fan community’s desire to “Help the Helpless.”” Here, then, the fans position themselves as fighters for justice, marking a commonality with their fictional heroes.

This is also seen in the posters’ optimism in the face of bad news. In responses to news of the cancellation, a number of posters provided reassurance that the activities of fans were making an impact:

“[...] various media is calling the SaveAngel drives "unprecedented" and E-Onlines's Save One Show got 85% of the votes going to Angel. All of the other shows listed only got 1-3% of the vote each. As of Feb. 14th, the possibility of a sixth season was zero percent. One month later, the possibility appears to be closer to 50%.” (spikeNDru, 12 March 2004, 18:48)

The campaign--which by any measure is the best organized campaign in TV history--helps assure the Powers that Be that we CAN'T BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED. (Njal, *Why we Fight*, 2 April 2004, 19:09)

The agentic nature of COA fans is also marked by the presentation of their sophisticated tastes/requirements as media audiences who require quality entertainment:

“So no matter what you think, for the sake of Angel, for the sake of other shows, and for the sake of TV that doesn’t have the mentality of a gerbil, SAVE ANGEL!!!” (DtB, *Wake Up People!!!!*, 4 March 2004, 20:38)

This emphasising of quality will be discussed further in the next section in relation to the members’ discussion of the relationship between ‘quality’ and ‘reality’ television. What is important here is the fans’ emphasis of positive affiliation and earnest belief in their own ability to change the fate of their loved series, albeit a belief fuelled by anxiety that all might be lost, and the reinforcement of an ethical drive to act. We will see in the final section of this chapter how inaction is construed as negativity, and how this ties into the regulation of community relations. As I discussed in Chapter 7,

¹⁰⁸ It started out as “We help the hopeless” but changed during the series.

whereas in SHH being too earnest, too eager and excitable might result in derision, here no earnestness is too excessive in the construction of the fan subject.

SHH

In discussion of the *Silent Hill* film on SHH, being a fan involves being a gamer, and - following the logic of many of the posters - a more sophisticated consumer of texts than those who 'passively' watch film/television. This sophistication is presented as stemming not just from the demands of the fans' preferred medium, but also their favoured videogame texts. In the next section I will demonstrate how these feed into the characterisation of mass and film audiences, involved in the ways that the fans mark themselves as different from the mainstream and the "AW HELL NAW DON'T GO IN DERE" horror film crowd (Munchy, 7 Mar 2006, 11:53). My concern here is with the ways their own agency is represented; this is very different from the configuration of agency on COA. Here agency is constructed in references to fans' engagement as players; specifically, players of a game that requires sophistication and expertise.

As seen in the following extract, perspectives on the nature of fan agency surface within posts which distinguish between engaging with film and videogames:

My opinion, so dont get all pissy~

The reson SH the movie will not do well, or be as good as the game is...

half of silent hill games is being the character, and getting in to the character, exploring and looking at what you want to in a delicious atmospher.

Silent hill the movie, there is no exploring wich "in my opinion takes 50% out of the greatness.

Then you will have the camra following the main character the entire movie, wich take out ALOT of the atmosphear. yes the game follow the main character but you get to choose where you wanna go. the movie is like telling you where to go, and what you should be looking at. [...] (sh#1fan)

Here, the shift from game to film medium is presented as a distancing move from the full engagement offered by videogames to the impoverishment of the cinema experience. This distinction introduces a generalised juxtaposition between videogames and film mediums and the requirements they demand. The interactive nature of the *Silent Hill* games is presented as demanding the agency of the player and allowing some freedom through exploration. In contrast a *Silent Hill* film would provide the constrained and linear experience of watching via a forced camera "following the main character." In the terms introduced in Chapter 7, the movement from playing to watching is configured by sh#1fan in this post as involving a rupturing of identification with the fictional world; a move from possible "involvement" to "estrangement."

The description of the game experience and the emphasising of exploratory challenges also serves to define the gamer/fan as an explorer rather than voyeur. This involves an identification with (being) a lone protagonist (rather than, as on COA, a team-member fighting collectively), introducing an affinity between gamer and videogame character. The mythologising of individualised agency and taking on an exploratory role here can therefore be regarded as invoking a resemblance to the fan object. This characterisation of gaming is, however, challenged by The Adversary, who steps in (in typically autocratic style) to correct the poster by problematising the generalising distinction being made. The Adversary reveals the enforced linearity of games with the comment: “There's a set path you have to take in the Silent Hill games as well. If you don't, you cannot proceed.”

In the discussion of SH4 presented in Chapter 7, references to exploration were a key reference in the nostalgic fixing of *Silent Hill*. Within similar references here, we also find the idea of an ethical code of ‘good’ audiencing within the site. Whilst not stated explicitly, this ethical position was demonstrated in the previous chapter in the ways in which posters were open to (albeit bashfully) admitting using walkthroughs on *Daddy Help Me!*, but rejected the use of cheat codes or hacking of the game. Whilst asking for help is acceptable, progression must ultimately be achieved alone (or with co-players in the ‘real’ world). This ethical stance reinforces the privileging of individual mastery of the game. The emphasising of agency involved in being a fan and gamer is tied to the establishing of ‘good’ activity and related forms of expertise. These are configured in relation to the object as a relatively closed text which needs to be beaten legitimately (in contrast to, for example, the activities of hackers). This earnestness underpins the demonstration of members’ expertise seen on *Daddy Help Me!* (a different sort of expertise than that which would be demonstrated by hackers).

As well as making distinctions between the demands of games and the restrictions of film, members of SHH also contrasted the qualities of the *Silent Hill* experience with those provided by other videogames. Here the fixing of *Silent Hill* tended to focus on the quality of its fictional narrative. Alongside the exploration element, the quality of the *Silent Hill* story was marked as different from the ‘empty’ action-based engagement

of other games such as *Resident Evil*.¹⁰⁹ As they presented themselves as able to grapple with a difficult, demanding and frightening text, members of SHH emphasised the sophistication and quality of their own engagement.

The poster Sylvine, for example, offers two reasons why s/he doesn't think the film will be a hit. The first is that the film's R-certification will limit the potential audience. The second is that:

It's got a deep storyline (warning: assumption ^^). Films with deep plots seldom make it to "hit", because a hit is determined by the sales. Thus, here we have yet another limitation - an intellectual one; sadly, there are a lot of dumb people out there [...] (Sylvine, 15 Mar 2006, 7:54pm)

Sylvine is speaking as fan of the series. The "assumption" that the film will have a deep storyline (because the games do) therefore asserts the poster's own intellectual ability (the ability to engage with the demands of the series). This move is different from the markers of sentimental allegiance to *Silent Hill* demonstrated in earlier chapters; the voicing of the need to be scared, and the fear of disappointment. Here, the poster demonstrates moves away from sentimentality through the stated recognition of the complexities and intellectual challenges of the texts. This has implications for how Sylvine is here positioning her/himself, and fixing their own identity as a fan within this context.

Interestingly, whilst posters such as Sylvine define themselves as able to appreciate and negotiate complex narratives, and as masters of the games (rather than "cheats" or passive consumers), others position themselves as slaves to the fan objects. These moves fix fan identity in relation to collection practices. This is seen in a somewhat different way in a number of posts which emphasise acts of consumption. For example:

[...] since I'm such a sucker, I will probably even BUY the movie even if I don't like it! (LizZiGicLae, 2 Jul 2005, 9:24am):

I have to buy the movie... I'm a HARDCORE Silent Hill fan, so I have to own every Silent Hill game or movie made. (Subway Guard – 3 July 2005, 5:43am)

Here, alongside more distanced positions on the forums, we find examples of the sorts of "commodity-completist practices" which, Hills (2002, 28) suggests, contradicts the configuration of 'good' fan identity. Consumption/collection is here defined as part of being a "Hardcore" fan; consumerism becomes evidence of fan status and identity.

¹⁰⁹ Although *Resident Evil 4* is widely admired on the more general boards.

Such moves appear to challenge the more ‘rationalising’ descriptions of fans’ activity in the other distinctions marked out by posters on the forums.

The mythologising and celebration of fan agency in the two sites provides an interesting empirical parallel to the celebration of fan activity in media/fan studies writing. My analysis of the data also develops and extends the discussion of the “textual agency” (Hills, 2005, 91) of fans. Notions of agency can be seen to be promoted and contested within activity which demonstrates the institutionalisation of the ethical underpinnings of what it is to be a fan on these sites. These are related to the legitimising of certain forms of engagement over others, and involve moves towards, and away from, sentimentalised identification with the texts. On both sites, earnest perspectives are defined in relation to general conceptualisations of being a fan. The moralising of the responsibilities of inhabiting such an identity are, however, more strongly expressed in the COA discussion than on SHH. On COA these responsibilities are defined in relation to the nature of the subject matter (*Angel*) and a general idea of fan activism. A general ethical position on legitimate approaches to gameplay also underpins the discussion of SHH fans’ engagement with their favoured videogame texts; as discussed, this can be considered in relation to the voicing of expertise on *Daddy Help Me!* There is also a difference on these sites between the romanticising of collective and individual agency. The focus on COA is on collective agency (through the actions of many individuals). On SHH, individual agency (supported by membership within a wider community) is privileged. Due to the direct links made between the fan activity and their favoured texts, this distinction can, I think, be related to the differences between the fan objects on these sites, the differences between the efforts of “Team Angel” and the lone protagonists of the *Silent Hill* games.

9.4 THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER ON COA AND SHH: EXTERNAL THREATS

My interest in this section is on the marking out of difference from external texts and audiences in the posting activity relating to the *Angel* campaign and the *Silent Hill* film. Two key external threats can be identified. On the COA forums this threat comes from reality television. On SHH it is located within an objectification of the ‘mainstream’ audience. On each site these are presented as challenging the stability of the fans’

activities and self-identity. The configuration of these threats serves to reinforce the fans' marketing of their own identities and practice as skilled and agentic, but also as authentic in contrast to invalidated others.

At the same time, I am also interested in the ways in which similarities between the members of COA and SHH and these external others emerge within the posting activity. Here my focus is on moments in which the proximity, and/or inter-reliance, between popular sites is acknowledged. The recruitment of, and reliance upon, others in these contexts is not just in terms of the construction of identity through contrast of cultural signifiers but also in economic terms – in the acknowledgement of the financial interdependency of fan interests with those of a broader media market and the texts and agents that inhabit it.

COA

The fans on COA position themselves in relation to range of external agents. In terms of the threat faced during the campaign, despite demonisation of the WB channel and Jordan Levin (the WB executive who cancelled the series), the ultimate enemy is a stable referent, one suggested in the extracts introduced in the previous section in terms of the need to defend “quality” and genre television. The ultimate threat is reality television, which is positioned as harbinger of the apocalypse, and commonly blamed for the downfall of *Angel*. On COA, if Joss Whedon is God, the Devil makes reality television. The poster DtB presents one such reading within a broader consideration of the state of American television:

[...] the reality is that this genre is almost extinct. Not because there aren't enough fans, but because the networks can get better rating through reality TV witch costs much less to produce. Someone posted that *Angel* cost too much to make. This isn't true, but it is when stacked up against a reality show. Pop reality TV is killing the series shows. It's cheap, doesn't last long, is quickly forgotten, and something new emerges. Networks don't have to worry about actors, contracts, sets, writers, etc. Cheap + Big Ratings = No more *Angel*. (DtB *End of an era?* – 10 March 2004, 19:10)

The animosity towards reality television voiced here should be understood in the context of the state of US television in 2004 – the cancellation of a number of fan popular (but non-mass appeal) genre television shows (including *Century City*, *Point Pleasant*, *Dead Like Me*, *Wonderfalls*, *Hack*) and the continuing rise of reality television series such as *Survivor* etc. The development of the idea of fans as moral defenders of quality television presented in the previous section can therefore be seen to be fuelled

by a shifting popular terrain, with announcements of cancellations shared on the forums (including three threads devoted to news of cancellation of other genre TV shows in March/April 2004).¹¹⁰ With posters receiving praise for presenting pertinent readings of the industry (as seen in Chapter 8), members define themselves as occupying a (vulnerable) position within the popular field - one which is in conflict with ratings led tastes. At the same time, however, they simultaneously express faith in their own influence. Their dependency on the media industry, rather than their affiliation to cult border-texts (in a traditional cult/mainstream oppositional model) is also made explicit.

Here, then, the enemy is a genre of television and what it is seen to represent, rather than a type of audience (although the guilt of the mass, unsophisticated audience is implied). This enemy was confirmed by Joss Whedon in interviews, extracts of which were posted on the COA boards (for example, his suggestion that “reality shows are in fact killing the landscape of television”¹¹¹). In contrast, *Angel* (along with the other Whedon texts) is positioned as the ‘good text’ – the worthy side of television production. As seen in the reference to the “cheapness” and impermanence of reality TV in the previous post, reasons for the fear and rejection of the genre are expressed through judgements about formal and aesthetic elements of television. These serve to mark out that which is valued on COA. This can be seen in the following two posts by Njal:

I think the only hope for the future TV is going to be cable and DVD. [...] This may be the only hope for shows like ANGEL and FIREFLY. They are very high quality and bear repeated reviewings on DVD. Very few reality shows will ever show up on DVD. You watch that trash once and you are done with it. Can you imagine ANYONE wanting a copy of a DVD version of BIG BROTHER? [...] (Njal, *End of An Era*, 11 March 2004, 10:46)

“[...] this campaign is the equivalent of Howard Beale (Peter Finch's character) in NETWORK shouting "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore." We are sick of reality TV! We want series with long story arcs! We love complex characters and subtle conversation! We want writers and directors (like Joss Whedon and his crew) who respect our intelligence! WE WANT QUALITY TV!!!! [the networks] need to know that not everyone wants sappy teen melodrama and embarrassing reality spectacles (though reality does prove a theory a friend of mine once had that people will do anything, no matter how degrading, to get onto TV). And that is why we must continue to fight.” (Njal, *Why We Fight*, 02 April 2004)

¹¹⁰ *Point Pleasant Cancelled*, 27 March 2006, *Wonderfalls Cancelled*, 3 April 2006, *Century City Joins Angel/Wonderfalls*, 6 April 2006

¹¹¹ (DtB, *Wake Up People!!* 3 April 2004, 20:38)

This rejection of reality television defines a range of qualities as revered and desired. In the first post, this involves a durable object that sustains involvement over time, and repeated engagements (rather than one-off consumption). In the second, professional authors and actors are privileged over amateur celebrities. The second post also focuses on the provision of inhabitable (chronotope) worlds with story arcs. This can be related to the desire for repeated viewings in the first post. Njal consistently sets the quality of auteur television in contrast to the quantity of reality television, denying the legitimacy of the authorship of the reality TV genre. Each post marks a nostalgic desire for a text that can be worked with/on, traditionally ‘authored’ fictional worlds. This continues the reification of Joss Whedon as auteur discussed in Chapter 7. The markers of taste within these distinctions also serve to present Njal’s own audiencing practices in terms of connoisseurship and their own ‘skilled’ fan agency. These two posts demonstrate how the celebration of the fan’s own agency and objectification of the interests of others are intertwined in the fans’ construction of their own practice.

This establishing of a distinction between pure and corrupted popular tastes, would seem to support an oppositional ‘elite’ approach to cultural texts - *Angel* fans defining themselves in opposition to an inferior other. Njal’s post, for example, sees this member positioning her/himself in relation to a (constructed) externalised cultural hierarchy. However, it is important to recall the positive opting in of the affiliation to *Angel* noted in the previous chapters; this was seen in COA posters’ enthused celebration of Joss Whedon, his fictions, and actors in Chapter 7. The identification of such moves suggests a very different form of affiliation from the more strategic selection of cult texts in Jancovich’s work on cult film fans (Jancovich, 2002, Jancovich and Hunt, 2004). This suggests a contrast between positive and negative fandom, an earnest opting in rather than a strategic opting out (seen in Jancovich’s (2002) example of fans shifting their allegiance when a series becomes popular because it no longer provides the same symbolic resonance).

The voicing of such closeness is also evident in the context of the “Save Angel” campaign. It is seen in the hysteria of the need to save the series, and in disappointment and anxiety when *Angel* was cancelled:

i'm in the depresso "Oh my god who would be so stupid to cancel angel right after buffy was cancelled" **tear** stage. I'm almost at the pissed angry part of it! (out of reality, *5 stages of grief*, 20 April 2004, 12:51)

The importance of thinking about the difference between positive and negative fandoms is revealed by these differing elements of the fans' performance of self through taste, and the rejection of that which is denied legitimacy within the site.

The dismissal of reality television suggests that it would be impossible to be a fan of a reality television series (an assumption that studies of reality television - such as the ongoing doctoral work of Rebecca Williams - would appear to challenge). Excluded as inauthentic, these texts are presented as unable to sustain fan modes of engagement. As Njal stated: "Can you imagine ANYONE wanting a copy of a DVD version of BIG BROTHER?" Whilst denying other fan interests, discussion from this period also sees members of COA assuming their rightful and dominant ownership, or possession, of particular fan interests. This introduces a different and fascinating slant to the fan/other distinction; a denial of similars which suggests the insularity of the culture.

When it was announced during the campaign that the WB* channel had commissioned a pilot for a remake of the 1960s gothic soap opera *Dark Shadows*,¹¹² posters on the COA boards voiced their annoyance. This discussion took place in three threads, with two devoted to the topic, their titles suggesting anger at the news: *I am seriously P'O'd* and *Dark Horizons wtf!?* The idea of a new *Dark Shadows* series at this point was controversial due to the generic similarities between the two shows, with *Dark Shadows*' textual universe inhabited by witches, warlocks and, significantly, vampires. Of these characters, the most popular was Barnabas Collins. An early predecessor to Angel, Barnabas was a similarly "melancholy, heroic vampire" who was to fall in love with a human (see www.darkshadowsonline.com).

Posters on COA responded to this news, and the similarities between the two shows, by presenting what might be interpreted as an anachronistic line of influence:

[...] I am sure that this current re-make will look like an "Angel" clone considering Barnabas Collins was in love with a human and wanted to BECOME human in the original soap opera". (Deadlynytshd)

¹¹² The series ran on ABC from 1966-1971, and surfaced again in the 1990s on NBC (the remake being cancelled after a short run), and also inspired two films, "House of Dark Shadows" (1970), and "Night of Dark Shadows" (1971) (see www.tv.com for series description and episode guides).

Wow! grr~ replacing Angel for another Vamp show which'll pretty much look almost like a clone.
HOw rude! Keep Angel! (Lil_Fred)

This annoyance also involved the voicing of belief in the importance of COA members' significance as an audience group, and their ownership of this genre of television:

Still don't get Levin's thinking on this. Why even attempt to put a new show about a vampire on the air when he has just alienated the entire potential vampire show audience by cancelling a show we already love. Who does he think will watch Dark Shadows now? [...] (The Warlock,)

[..]a lot of people are going to refuse to watch on a matter on principle [...] (altaira,).

As well as representing themselves as representing the totality of TV vampire fans, such posts served to exclude the existing fan audience of the original *Dark Shadows* (those that might be expected to have a vested interest in watching a new *Dark Shadows* series). Despite the lack of new material, the *Dark Shadows* fandom has managed to sustain its interest and visibility, hosting a *Dark Shadows* festival each year since 1983.¹¹³

In their discussion of *Dark Shadows* the fans on COA demonstrate an awareness of the series, but a biased reading of it. The closeness of *Dark Shadows* to *Angel* is presented as a direct affront. Here COA members position themselves as representative of the entire interested audience of a specific genre of television entertainment. In doing so, whilst denying reality TV fans legitimacy, they also fail to acknowledge, and indeed exclude, pre-established and more similar fan interests.¹¹⁴ In fact they exclude fans who have proved the durability of their own interest, when those on COA have yet to demonstrate the durability of their own interest in the face of a closed canon text.

SHH

Two broad sources of anxiety relating to the film adaptation of *Silent Hill* were voiced on the boards of SHH. The first related to the sanctity of the fan object; fears of the potential damage to the canon through an inauthentic or inaccurate film adaptation, and the flattening of the game experience in terms of the lack of 'interactivity' the film would offer (as seen in the fans' distinctions between videogame and film mediums in the last section).

¹¹³ See www.darkshadowsfestival.com.

¹¹⁴ . This response contrasts with moves on the forums to support other series and genres when they are facing moments of crisis.

As with the growing influence of reality television in the context of the cancellation of *Angel*, these fears appeared to be fuelled by the background to the film, in particular the poor quality of existing videogame-to-film adaptations. The work of infamous pillagers of popular gaming titles such as Uwe Boll (director of film adaptations of *House of the Dead*, *Alone in the Dark*, and *Bloodrayne* whose films have inspired fan hatred and a Stop Dr Uwe Boll petition¹¹⁵) and to a lesser extent Paul W.S. Anderson (director of *Resident Evil*), served as worrying antecedents for those concerned about the adaptation. These concerns about the threat to the object involved discussion of the potential rupturing anti-quilting points discussed in chapter 2. Despite concerns about potential fissures in the canon, these were on the whole presented as being relatively easy to contain. As described in Chapter 7, one response was to demonstrate the possible separation of the film from the ‘proper’ *Silent Hill* object – the games. And in terms of the quality of the film, the makers of the *Silent Hill* film were regarded as linked to ‘respectable’ texts – the director Christophe Gans being a European rather than Hollywood director (a distinction marked as significant in posting activity) with his earlier film *Brotherhood of the Wolf* being well received, and Roger Avary (the writer) having produced and co-written *Pulp Fiction* with Quentin Tarantino. These works established acceptable cultural reference points and raised optimism about the film. This optimism was enforced, as discussed in Chapter 7, by the attention to authenticity and detail perceived to have been paid by the producers.

The second, and more pressing external threat cited in the discussion involved the practices, tastes, and quality of the ‘mainstream’ or ‘mass’ audiences that the film would potentially draw into the *Silent Hill* fold. As introduced earlier, media scholars have examined how categories of ‘cult’ and ‘mainstream’ are constructed within fandoms and how “these distinctions are central to the complex operation of the cultural competences and dispositions within this field” (Jancovich, 2002, 308). On SHH, the fans repeatedly referenced and characterised the inhabitants of the mainstream. In doing so, they defined themselves, their own competences and dispositions. The mainstream audience is configured in a number of different ways in the posting activity, but typically in negative terms.

¹¹⁵ See <http://www.petitiononline.com/RRH53888/petition.html>

For example, the mainstream is introduced in imagined form as threatening fans' ownership and possession of the series:

I would like that SH remains a closed community (gaming, etc...)
I really do not want that a film is released on the cinema.
SH was born with the gamers... And it becomes a way of life for some of us.
I don't want that little kid & stupid teenager talk about this like the new "Scharzenger" or the "Ultra Fight 2006".
"Did you see the new Silent Hill movie ? I never heard about it before, but it look like cool and it's pretty violent ! Let's go and see him .. Buy popcorn"
If they make a film, they loose a fan. (Omegear, *SH Movie Fear Discussion related*, 25 Jul 2005, 2:27pm)

This caricature of the teenage moviegoer creates a value-ridden us/them distinction, which configures *Silent Hill* fans as 'good' consumers. This involves the establishing of differentiations between mediums (the difference between gaming and movies), and also between texts (*Silent Hill* compared with Arnold Schwarzenegger and "Ultra Fight 2006"; this appears to be a reference to a Japanese superhero series¹¹⁶). The reference in the final line to the producers as "they" also suggests distance (compared with, for example, the way Whedon is spoken about on COA). Here, of course, the producers are other than the producers of the *Silent Hill* games.

This imagined other is also recruited in imaginings of possible responses of a mass audience:

Ppl¹¹⁷ will hype it, get the games, lots of SH know-it all wannabes will spawn and the sequel will only be a matter of months away...
or...
Ppl will just regard it as just one more boo movie with unusualy creative creature desgin and be like "meh... that was nice... I guess... whats up with those gooey walls?! and that pyramid... uhhh... head... thing!... whoever made this smoked something bad" and forget about it the next day [..]
(rip, 5 Mar 2006, 2:29am)

It is also promoted as a threat in discussion of fears of how the financial demands of appealing to a mass audience would impact upon the film; for example fears that the producers would need to "politically correctify" the series,¹¹⁸ or that it would be cheapened in order to be popular and financially successful (like reality television). The possibility that:

[..] it'l become real popular, in a USA fridge-magnet jinda way (no offense intended to anyone).
Silent Hill may become cheap and vulgar. (SAQQA, *Latest news on movie SPOILER*)

¹¹⁶ see <http://www.ultraman.com/>

¹¹⁷ People

¹¹⁸ *nightshadow_taffer* – *Would you walk out?* 04 Jul 2005, 6:11 am

After the release of the film, the spectre of the mainstream took physical form, documented in descriptions of viewing experiences with audiences who had behaved and responded inappropriately during screenings. A number of threads from this time were devoted to discussion of cinema audiences laughing at the film:

[...] Personally, imo, as a fan, I did not find this movie funny at all, and it irritated me when people in my theatres laughed. I know that the acting is very B-grade , amd certain scene deserved a laugh or two. But the whole movie wasn't a joke. It was very dark and serious.

My number one obvious reason is they haven't played the game. My second guess would be that they're not really serious people [...] (Kurado, *Which parts Made your audience Laughed*, 25 Apr 2006 3:19 am)

Audience laughter is here judged as marking an inappropriate sceptical mode of identification with the film, a response which is denied legitimacy in relation to the audiencing of the (or any) *Silent Hill* text.

The visibility of the series also provoked fears that SHH would be inundated with new members drawn to the site by the film rather than the games. As I will discuss in the next section, this visibility did prove to have serious implications for SHH. Even before the release of the film, however, “concern over bandwidth issues, and just a lot of newbs or jerks running around in general?”¹¹⁹ was being expressed.

The idea that the site might be frequented by new members whose first contact with the series had been the (in) authentic film offspring, rather than the ‘difficult’ experience of the games, was unacceptable to some members of the site. There was, however, some effort to understand the perspective of the other:

As I watched the trailer I tried to look at it from an uninformed person's eyes. [...] (nuguns61, Flip or Flop, 15 Mar 2006, 10:26 pm)

The use of the term “uninformed” supports and re-affirms the fan’s sense of his/her own superiority (just as the distinction between gamers and film viewers in the last section did). Whilst this uninformed audience received scant support, a number of posters suggested that the ultimate responsibility for the film rested with the filmmakers rather than the audiences. For example:

[...] On a small side note, I also think we're underestimating people just a little bit. Just because they haven't played the games doesn't mean the general public is stupid and bumbling. If the movie is truly good, it won't matter if you've played the games. [...] If people that haven't played the games don't understand anything other than the gore, Gans hasn't done his job as a storyteller. [...] (Fersevis, Flip or Flop, 5 Mar 2006 3:06pm)

¹¹⁹ Biomechanical, *Worries about forum population spike?* 12 Apr 2006, 2:06pm

On a number of occasions fans attempted to recruit a number of outsiders as representatives of the other in order to gauge the opinion of the unknown audience - those unfamiliar with *Silent Hill*:

I showed my dad the trailer and he said "I can't really make a call, I don't get what I'm looking at." Like someone said, it's very hard to get all excited about seeing a shot of PH when you don't know what he/it is. [...] (Fersevis, Sun 05 Mar, 2006, 3:06pm)

Funny thing: My mother, who is not into games at all, and will usually yawn and turn away from any movie based on one (except Doom, so far), is very interested to see Silent Hill movie. [...] I think, whether non-SH-fans enjoy the movie or not, 1) some will, and 2) they'll at least pay out the money to see it, which is all Hollywood cares about. [...] (From the Lost Days, Sun 05 Mar, 2006 8:09pm)

Here, we see attempts to use close to hand (typically friends/family members) non-believers to try to predict the response of an alien audience. These posts also express the difficulty of this endeavour for those so far 'within' the series.

In setting themselves against a mainstream, non-aware audience, the posters mark out a boundary and in so doing attempt to mark out difference. This boundary is, however, challenged in different ways on the boards by emerging similarities between SHH members and mainstream audiences. This similarity is seen within arguments about the status of *Silent Hill* as a potentially mainstream game. This is evident in a response to the post in which Omegear stated that they wanted *Silent Hill* to remain closed ("for the gamers"):

Silent Hill IS well known. SH1 and 2 are Greatest Hits titles. SH2 was featured prominently in gaming magazines before its release. It's a hell of a lot more well known than fans who desperately want it to be a big secret are willing to admit. Fatal Frame, Clock Tower and Echo Night. Now THOSE are obscure horror titles. [...] (Drewfus)

This one-upmanship demonstrates knowledge of 'truly' obscure games and reveals the (mainstream) status of *Silent Hill*. It also positions *Silent Hill* fans within the mainstream; this results in a destabilising of the boundary between categories of fan self and mainstream other.

The importance of consumption, which was noted in the previous section as a marker of being a 'hard-core' fan, provides another challenge to the separation the members worked to establish. The mainstream audience is positioned as potentially driving the corruption of the series, spoiling the experience of watching, and polluting the site. However the boundary between fan and mainstream, and the rationalising moves that these posts might be seen to demonstrate, are undermined by members' voiced hopes that the film would be a success in order to ensure a sequel. The activity therefore

suggests a closeness to, and reliance upon, the same mainstream audience which is denied legitimacy within the site.

In this section I have examined how the position of fan selves is marked out on COA and SHH as different from a constructed external other (reality television/mainstream audience). I have also suggested that this distinction is destabilised as the kinship between fan and other emerges in different ways. In each site, for example, members are in some ways reliant upon the non-legitimated other; in the case of COA this is for audience and visibility, in the case of SHH, for potential sequels. From looking at the border challenges in relation to external agents and sites, I am now going to look at members' responses to challenges from within.

9.5 THE NEGOTIATION OF INTERNAL THREATS

In this final section, I am going to look at internal challenges to these sites relating to these two events in order to demonstrate how the exclusion of others and the mythologising of agency functions within the intra-site positioning that I examined in the previous two chapters. This discussion can be related to my discussion of authority in Chapter 8, but also the maintenance of earnest modes of engagement in the face of sceptical positions discussed in Chapter 7. Here we find conflict between the configuration of opposing versions of what it is to be a good fan, and what it is to be a good community member on COA and SHH.

COA

In the last chapter I described how the COA members enforced hegemonic unity in relation to criticisms of Joss Whedon and responses to *Serenity* through both suturing moves and the objectification of deviant posters. Such strategies were also evident in discussion of the "Save Angel" campaign where criticism of the campaign was read as 'passivity' and 'negativity' and marked as unacceptable. In this way, members regulated a united front of earnestness at the exclusion of rupturing questions/criticisms. Examples of sceptical positions were limited, and - where present - the merest hint of a sceptical position was strongly rejected/attacked. In fact, of the 941 posts I examined from 61 threads, only 7 posters (in 13 posts) presented explicitly sceptical positions in relation to the chances that the campaign would be a success and/or that specific campaign strategies were worthwhile. I am going to examine how such 'negativity'

was excluded, consensus enforced, and how the mythologising of fan agency and objectification of external threats was intertwined within this activity.

Although the number of examples is limited, the data does contain some direct challenges to the positive affiliation to the “Save Angel” campaign. In contrast to the earnest configuration of fan agency as ethical responsibility, these challenges can be seen as rupturing moves, which threatened to undermine the general positive tone. For example:

Your right, we all need to fight for TV. Because I mean if there wasnt any TV programs on we liked we would have to do something horrible....like get a hobby...or go out doors. Oh my god [...]

People I agree that Angel being over is sad. But devoting your life to making sure that all TV is up to your standards is ridiculous. Perhaps this is a good time for everybody to go out there, get more physically active. If you want to fight for a worthy cause, try donating your time (and money) to something like cancer research, or help fight poverty, or do something that benefits society. Because for the most part, television is just entertainment, agreed, we all need entertainment now and then. But there is so much better stuff we can do with our time. (R-Plane, *Wake Up People!!!!* 4 March 2004, 22:04)

R-Plane’s sceptical challenge uses the notion of “more worthy” issues and the superficiality of fictional popular entertainment to challenge the earnestness on the site, suggesting that the series is just entertainment and that there are more important things to worry about (an argument that was also seen in reminders that “its just a game” in the heated discussion of *SH4*). Responses challenge R-Plane and his inaction:

Boy, I would love to live in R-planes world! Can we all get tickets? Your reasoning is why there are so many things wrong with this country. [...] I would say that by taking the attitude of R-plane, you are making the situation worse. Taken to the extreme, soon, there won’t be anything to turn to and you will be forced to do things. [...] (DtB, 4 April 2004. 08:19am)

DtB’s post provides a direct challenge to R-Plane’s sceptical position, a challenge which is voiced in a sarcastic tone, is disparaging of the poster, and re-asserts the importance of the campaign.

Even when posters questioned the campaign in rhetorical rather than openly confrontational terms, however, they found their questions interpreted as unacceptable opinions. The threads contain a number of restrained and hesitant questionings of the campaign and its likely success, which are shut down by the group. This demonstrates how the merest hint of negativity is closed down in the site. Such moves can be seen in the following interaction from the thread *Are the Fans Dying Down?!*:

honestly...it wont do much good. im not trying to be pessimistic and i voted on many phorums...but...we have to face facts...there will be no angel season 6..plz dont be upset at me for this :([...] (Evil_willows_soulmate, 13 March 2004, 18:40)

I'm not giving up. The fight is bigger than Season 6 of angel - its about saving Quality TV. People who say I'm giving up cause there is not much hope really get on my goat. No one ever said that this fight was going to easy nor were any promises that we would succeed. Angel fans should take heart. You have made the world stand up and take a serious look at what is happening to the quality of TV. All the publicity over the past 2 months (cause its 8 weeks since WB staked our hearts) and it still continues to gain momentum. What other shows are people talking about? Its all about Angel, Angel, Angel - its the buzz word at the moment. Fight the Good Fight (icat2000, 13 April 2004, 21:37)

Evil_willows_soulmate if ur gona say something bad say it somewhere else! its people like you who make fans give up hope so if u cant say anythin supportive dont say anything at all (dumbblonde, 14 April 2004, 06:21am)

heloo.....dumb blond..i said i want trying to be pessimistic...i was just saying the odds are against us..so dont get pissed at me! (Evil_willows_soulmate, 14 April 2004, 07:55am)

The hedging and defensive moves in the opening post fail to prevent the poster from being criticised; Evil_willows_soulmate is labelled pessimistic and negative (rather than appropriately hopeful and supportive), in terms that move to exclude him/her (“people like you”) from the discussion, “if ur gona say something bad say it somewhere else!” This interaction also articulates a belief in the visibility of the campaign that has been generated by the fans. Here we see the members closing down negativity without the bureaucratic intervention of a moderator. This is in spite of the defensive positioning of the (actually very earnest) poster Evil_willows_soulmate.

SHH

The discussion of the *Silent Hill* film on SHH is marked by more conflict and more varied position-taking than the discussion of the *Angel* campaign on COA. The discussion also demonstrates clashes between opposing perspectives about what SHH should be like, and who should be allowed to say what. After the release of the film, the arrival of a large number of new members to the site was to prove a destabilising influence. The challenge it represented is similar to that described at the end of Baym’s *Tune In Log On*, and also in other studies of online sites facing an expansion of visibility and membership (see Ito, 2001; Hafner, 2001). Here, however, this challenge was not due to the growth of the Internet but the recontextualisation of the fan object.

In the run up to the release of the film, fears that the site might be popularised - to the detriment of the site's specialised practice and membership - inspired calls for a segregation of newbie posters from the activity of experienced members. This idea was strongly rejected by Vixx (*Hit and Run Guests*, 22 Apr 2006). In the run up to the release the increase in membership was quite stable, but was followed by a sharp leap of posts and new members. The dramatic expansion of SHH's membership is visible as quantitative data in membership levels and thread activity over the film's opening weekend (see Fig. 9.1).

	Posts		Members	
MON 17 April 2006	76324	(+ 941)	4908	(+28)
TUE 18 April 2006	77251	(+ 927)	4946	(+38)
WED 19 April 2006	78233	(+ 982)	4983	(+37)
THU 20 April 2006	79186	(+ 953)	5017	(+34)
Separation of SILENT HILL FILM forum into spoiler-free and spoiler + forums				
FRI 21 April 2006	80239	(+1053)	5054	(+37)
Release of Silent Hill in Europe and the USA				
SAT 22 April 2006	81995	(+1756)	5122	(+68)
SUN 23 April 2006	85089	(+3094)	5317	(+195)
MON 24 April 2006	86467	(+1378)	5406	(+89)
TUE 25 April 2006	88373	(+1906)	5502	(+96)
FORUM DOWN				
WED 26 April 2006				
THU 27 April 2006	91460	(+3087)	5639	(+137)

Fig. 9.1: SHH Post Counts and Membership Levels 17th-27th April 2006
(figures in brackets are the increase from the previous day's post/membership nos.)

As noted in Fig. 9.1, the SHH forums suffered downtime on 25th April because the site had exceeded its bandwidth. Here the impact of the film, and the new audience it had produced, became very tangible. The increase in activity was also visible in graphical terms (see Fig. 9.2) by a hike in the number of users in 2006.¹²⁰



Fig. 9.2 – SHH Daily Reach Source: Alexa.com¹²¹

¹²⁰REACH here is a measurement of the number of users, expressed by Alexa “as number of users per million.”http://www.alexa.com/data/details/traffic_details?&range=2y&size=medium&compare_sites=&y=r&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.silenthillheaven.com#top.

¹²¹http://www.alexa.com/data/details/traffic_details?&range=2y&size=medium&compare_sites=&y=r&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.silenthillheaven.com#top last accessed 11 May 2006.

The acceleration of posting activity was particularly visible on the forums specifically relating to the film, as the number of topics/posts on the *Silent Hill Movie Forum* and *SPOILERIFIC Movie Forum* demonstrates (see Fig. 9.3):

	Silent Hill Movie Forum		SPOILERIFIC Movie Forum	
	Topics	Posts	Topics	Posts
21 April 2006	369	8749	3	29
22 April 2006	382	9007	62	905
24 April 2006	411	9256	186	3045
25 April 2006	424	9400	213	3701
26 April 2006	FORUMS DOWN			
27 April 2006	433	9512	236	4380

Fig. 9.3: Numbers of topics/posts on the Silent Hill Movie Forum and the SPOILERIFIC Movie Forum.

This rapid expansion became a cause for concern for a number of posters, resulting in (often nostalgic) requests for the overstretched¹²² moderators to deal both with the influx of visitors and the nature of their posts:

It should be renamed to SPOILERIFIC Retard Forum
 Seriously, do something about it. Please.
 (Hometown, *SPOILERIFIC movie forum complete anarchy* 23 Apr, 2006 3:48).

In the days following the film’s release, moderators were kept busy policing deviance and wielding their bureaucratic authority. Alongside this work we find moves by other posters who do not hold such positions, to acquire and demonstrate their own traditional and charismatic authority within interactions. As a result, some conflict was visible between opposing ideals of what *Silent Hill* fans should be and how members of SHH should behave.

In exploring this conflict I am going to focus on posts from one thread *I feel bad for people who haven't played the game*.¹²³ The thread opened on the 23rd April, two days after the release of the film, with the following post from Zoso_IV:

I just saw the movie today, and I loved it! Christopher Gans did such an amazing job. It couldn't have been any better. But while I was in the theater, I was constantly thinking to myself "What are the people in the theater who haven't played the game thinking?"

¹²² St Thomas (aka The Adversary) notes “We get the idea: It’s busy. There’s 173 people online right now. One of them (St Thomas) happens to be a Moderator. If you have a problem with how it looks right now, I might suggest coming back in the morning” (*SPOILERIFIC movie forum complete anarchy*, Sun 23 Apr, 2006 4:55am)

¹²³ The dates at which the members joined the site are included in the posts I discuss here because this becomes relevant to the analysis.

Over 60% of the people in that theater were just young kids looking for a scary movie, and they came out "This movie sucked, BLAH BLAH BLAH" And I just wanted to punch the kid saying "That's one of the greatest movies of the year!"

Does anyone else feel sorry for average movie-goers who haven't played the game?

I do, and I'm glad we are the minority who can actually see the greatness in this movie. Let's all get together and sing a song! (Zoso_IV, Joined 13 March 2006, posted 23 Apr 2006)

This post is followed by two posts from newbie members TwilightPro and Justaguy. Each stated that they had limited (or no) experience of the game before they saw the film:

I had played the game once to my experience and handled the film well enough. Sure, I didn't have the whole thing put together but I had enough basis of facts presented in the film to get the basics. Within the past couple days, I've become fairly knowledgeable in the game world and the differences thanks to both this site and a few others. (TwilightPro, joined 22 Apr 2006, posted 23 April 2006 5:41am)

i didnt play cause kinda scared... (Justaguy, joined 23 April 2006, Posted 23 April 2006 5:18am)

Here, TwilightPro presents a defence of their status and an appropriate attempt at apprenticeship, whereas Justaguy makes her/himself vulnerable by admitting that s/he was too scared to play the games. In contrast, playing and being scared - but not giving up - would have been acceptable. This is followed by an interaction between two more experienced members who respond to the recent changes to the site in negative, and in Frozenhalo's case, aggressive terms:

I don't feel sorry for them because they're stupid idiots who are beneath me. Beneath us. If they don't get it, it's because they're too stupid to understand art and atmosphere, and they shoulda went to see Larry the Cable Guy or some other dumb shit. (FrozenHalo, Joined 06 Dec 2005, posted, Sun 23 Apr, 2006 6:48am)

You know Frozen Halo, I would have looked at that comment as rude and a little elitist like 3 months ago but I really really really am starting to feel that way. This influx of newbies disturbing all of the usual, rational discussions are starting to wear on me... A LOT. I mean, the whole "they died at the beginning" thing is just... whatever.. (lovelytourniquet, joined 13 Oct 2004, posted Sun 23 Apr, 2006 6:54am)

We don't need them! We are almost like a family here, now...we learn from eachother and teach eachother things. We don't need the "moviegoers" in here asking stupid questions and throwing their ill-formed preconceptions of what is Silent Hill at us. Oh, and The Fallen Angel. Your opinion is stupid. Feel free to join another website that might actually care about it. WE ARE THE FANS. not you. (Frozenhalo, Sun 23 Apr, 2006 6:57 am)

Hahaha, man that is harsh but I like it! Lol (lovelytourniquet , Sun 23 Apr, 2006 6:58 am)

At this point, the moderator St Thomas (aka The Adversary), the most experienced of the posters (joined 19 July 2003), steps in to the discussion, and places her/himself on the side of the newbies:

If any of you have qualms with the new people, go somewhere else. We don't tolerate assholes round here--Frozen Halo being a prime example: He's gone. Here's the kicker though: Every Silent Hill forum is going to be replete with new people. Some of them may be uninformed compared to

other more familiar members, but that doesn't make them deserving of some shitty attitude from regulars. Got a problem with it? Send me a PM.¹²⁴ (St. Thomas, 23 Apr 2006 7:18 am)

This exclusion of Frozen Halo from the discussion (“He’s gone”), serves to contradict Frozen Halo and lovelytourniquet’s concerns about the fate of the site and who is legitimately able to speak within the setting. We can see this as a denial of an attempt by Frozen Halo and lovelytourniquet’s to use their experience and claims to traditional authority within the site (established through their longitudinal engagement with the legitimate *Silent Hill* texts - the games) to reject newbie others as subaltern. The bureaucratic support of an inclusionary ideology wielded by The Adversary overrides their moves. This serves as an interesting clash between traditional and bureaucratic authority strategies discussed in Chapter 8, and also represents conflict between ideas of what it is to be a fan and what being a ‘good’ member of SHH involves.

9.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have examined the configuration of fan identities in order to explore how the members of COA and SHH define their own practice, and how they relate this to a broader popular sphere. The responses to the “Save Angel” campaign and the *Silent Hill* film involved the establishing of a cultural face, and objectification of external threats. Each of these moves involved a mythologising of their own agency. On COA this was established both in relation to the nature of the fan object, but also the belief that the fans would be able to save *Angel*. On SHH this is tied into conceptualisations of the distinction between videogames and films, between new and old media, and raises notions of interactivity found in academic work on the videogame medium.

This emphasis on agency and ‘doing things’ is similar to that within Hills’ description of “textual agency.” However, the voicing of anxiety and affective engagement within the two sites breaks with Hills’ concept. Rather than “warding off” affect, I have suggested that the members continually re-establish their sentimentalised relationships to the two objects here (as in the previous chapters). This chapter also continues the emphasis of positive rather than negative affiliation with the fan objects; this can be contrasted with the establishing of cult/mainstream distinctions as an exclusive opting out. At the same

¹²⁴ Personal message.

time, however, members of both sites - but specifically on SHH - demonstrate moves to define their identification in terms that deny a purely sentimental mode of engagement with media texts, presenting themselves as masters of their loved objects.

The particular style of the members' mythologising of their agency/interactivity can in each case be related to the events, the object texts and the contexts. The configuration of fan identity in each site may be seen to be linked to the nature of the two fan objects – the collective efforts to “Help the Helpless” and the individual exploration of game texts. However, I would also argue that the particular formation, and specifically maintenance, of fan identity in response to these events on COA and SHH also suggests a reaction to the events surrounding the sites and their chosen objects. With COA members facing the death of the series, a closing down of the ranks and hegemonising of message was perhaps unsurprising. In contrast, the discussion of the *Silent Hill* film on SHH took place within a far more secure context; with rumours surrounding the next *Silent Hill* game (SH5), and the homepage of the website promising a “re-design due Spring 2006,” members currently have a lot to look forward to. The conflict and multiple voices and positions on the site are challenging, but the members at least know they have time and space to play/argue (unless the site is hacked again, that is...). However, as noted above in my mention of the downtime that the site recently experienced, the *Silent Hill* movie demonstrated the possibility of further challenges to the health of the site. There is no evidence in my sampled set of threads that the COA campaign led to a rise in unwanted newbie members, just opposition to sceptical, negative positions.

In relation to the concept of agency, the events on COA differ from those represented in many of the enthusiastic and optimistic claims about fan productivity in fan studies writing. In talking about the “Save Angel” campaign, unlike studies which have celebrated the agency/power of fans within the ‘new media age,’ I am reporting fans efforts towards, interest in, and responses to, an unsuccessful attempt to save a show, which was to lead to the closure of the forums on COA. At the same time, I would argue that the regulation of earnest affiliation on COA, seen in discussion of *Serenity* in the last chapter, is also demonstrated in the data relating to the “Save Angel” campaign: if anything, here the earnest affiliation can be seen to be more rigorously and urgently enforced, central to the particular performance of fan identity on the site.

The discussion of *Dark Shadows* on COA in this context is bittersweet as it is reminder of the temporal challenges television fans face when their series is cancelled: their affiliation, presented with such intensity of interest, is vulnerable in the face of the closure of the text. The *Dark Shadows* fandom that was generated during a pre-Internet time persists: the future of *Angel's* fan culture without its figurehead is at this point uncertain. The remake did not surface (although the pilot was screened at the 2005 *Dark Shadows* weekend, to apparent great acclaim¹²⁵). The significance for the existing *Dark Shadows* fans would have been great if it had, having dealt with a 'closed' text for so long.

¹²⁵ See <http://www.mediavillage.com/jmentr/2005/08/09/jmer-08-09-05/>

CHAPTER 10 CONCLUSION

10.1 ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE RESEARCH

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL ACHIEVEMENTS.

In Chapter 2 I suggested that despite the established interest in the relationship between school/academic practices and those of fan communities, the pedagogic strategies deployed within online fan cultures have not yet received adequate empirical exploration. Due to the centrality within fan studies of claims about the relationship between fan and academic practices, the analysis of varied pedagogic moves within COA and SHH is a key achievement of the research. This achievement can be positioned both in relation to the existing field of fan studies and beyond it, and in relation to both theoretical and empirical concerns.

I set out to describe the strategies deployed in the formation, maintenance and destabilising of online alliances and oppositions, and the patterns of consumption and identification with fan objects on these sites. In addressing these issues, I have both recruited the language of Social Activity Theory and extended it in new directions. This development has been influenced by my own personal academic orientation; the categories and terms I have introduced in this thesis to some extent emerge from my interest in film and media. The resulting theoretical language provides a coherent structure for contrasting different sites of social activity, and - as my own use of Dowling's modes of authority action schema demonstrates - has the potential to be recruited productively in the analysis of other settings. As I noted in relation to Mary Douglas's discussion of comparative research in Chapter 3, the development of such a language - and with it the establishment of some distance from the activity that is being explored - is particularly important in research that spans different empirical settings. The analytical schemas that I have developed relating to modes of nostalgia and identification in these sites, can therefore be regarded as tools for exploring further sites of activity both online and offline.

The activity described in this thesis includes examples of explicitly pedagogic teaching and learning activities similar to those identified in other work on media fans. These include examples of tutoring, theorising, and what might be referred to as 'knowledge

production.’ However I have gone beyond a focus on the identification of types of productivity, instead developing a relational and de-essentialised conceptualisation of the pedagogic activity involved in the regulation and de/stabilisation of authorship, utterances, and positions on these sites. This has enabled me to examine the strategies by which community relations and individual avatar identities are maintained in these settings.

In exploring these strategies I have built upon existing understandings of how authority and status are established within fan communities. At the same time, by examining the maintenance of identification with fan objects on these sites, I have also developed work which has sought to problematise the positive – or in the terms I have introduced, earnest - modes of identification which have commonly been the focus of those working within fan studies research. One central distinction in my work has been the consideration of negative and positive fandom as manifest on these sites; the voicing of opting-out or opting-in, and how this is regulated. This extension can be related back to (and contrasted with) existing work, including James Gee’s model of the affinity space which I discussed in Chapter 5. My own work has developed the understanding of affinity within such settings, by exploring the de/stabilisation of affiliation as expressed in these sites and the strategies by which affinity to particular objects is established and maintained.

I have also described how these affiliating strategies are involved in the configuration of community and identity on these sites. In Chapter 5 I established my use and definition of these concepts in relation to a range of theoretical influences; antecedent works which have in differing ways developed de-essentialised and relational conceptualisations of practice and subjectivity. This establishing of a de-essentialised conceptualisation of identity and community was also considered in relation to broader debates relating to online and offline environments. Whilst some of the theoretical work I introduced has long been influential within fan studies research (for example Bourdieu’s work on cultural distinction), I have also recruited theoretical concepts which suggest new approaches within this field. Alongside my use of Dowling’s Social Activity Theory, other works cited, including my recontextualisation of Lacanian concepts in my exploration of the struggles over and regularity of quilting points within interactions on COA and SHH, constitute an innovation within the fan studies literature.

My analysis of COA and SHH has explored the fixing and unfixing of identity at different levels; these include the identity of the fan objects (the negotiation of what a *Silent Hill* game is, or should be, for example), the identity of the fan sites, and the objectification of 'being a fan.' I have also described the relationships between these different levels, describing how the participants on these sites draw from (objectified) conceptualisations of the textual identity of the fan objects in defining their own identities, and also suggested that this fixing/unfixing is related to a range of external events. The events I have described have pertained to both the health of the fan objects (e.g. the cancellation of Angel, the release of SH4), and the sites themselves (e.g. the closure of COA forums, the hacking of SHH). This thesis has thus provided an account of modes of pedagogic activity and identity/community formation in which the configuration of posting activity has been considered in relation to the trajectory of both the fan objects and the fan sites.

My development and extension of Dowling's "organisational language" (2004a, 2004b) has enabled me to identify a number of continuities and discontinuities between COA and SHH; sites which I have presented as being at different stages of development. I have described the deployment of similar strategies on both sites; these include fans' celebration of their own agency, their nostalgic fixing of the fan objects in posting activity and their use of varied authority claims. The patterning of this activity has, however, differed between these two settings. A number of discontinuities have been introduced. In my discussion of the modes of identification on these sites, for example, I described the differences in the ways in which the avatars on these sites are positioned in relation to the fan objects, with the enforcement and of regulation of earnest modes of identification with the fan objects on COA standing in contrast to the maintenance of opposing and often sceptical positions on SHH. I also described differences in the configuration of fan identity on these sites, identity which is, as noted above, established both in relation to the characteristics of the different fan objects and in relation/opposition to other sites of popular culture activity. In doing so, I described the mythologising of different forms of agency on these sites. Here I am referring specifically to the ways in which, in establishing their own identities as fans, members of COA established identifications with the collective efforts of those who would "help the helpless," and members on SHH celebrated their own individualised agency as

videogame explorers. I have also described the prevalence of differing authority strategies in the two settings, and how whilst those with bureaucratic authority were celebrated on both sites, the ergodic nature of the fan object on SHH provoked explicitly pedagogic and apprenticeship activity which privileged and celebrated those bearing the markers of traditional authority.

The identification of such commonalities and differences in my description continues moves within fan studies research to seek both the common features and the characteristic differences between diverse sites of fan activity. This moves away from the search for a homogenising theory of fandom, and what it is to be a fan, towards localised descriptions of fan activity.

METHODOLOGICAL ACHIEVEMENTS

The critical approach to research in online environments established in this thesis is one which, rather than focusing on the differences between offline and online research, recognises the continuities between the challenges of research in both domains. I have positioned my approach in alliance with other researchers who have argued that in all contexts the researcher is faced with performances, and in opposition to those who argue that those who engage in ‘real world’ research are closer to empirical ‘truth’ than those online. Whilst identifying a number of the particular difficulties of online research, I have demonstrated how the issues faced are similar to those encountered by researchers working within embodied environments. In what is still a relatively new field, my discussion of the ways in which I dealt with these difficulties - for example the instability of COA and SHH as research settings and the various approaches I took towards archiving data - adds to the guidance already available for those interested in exploring Internet environments.

The longitudinal nature of my involvement with COA and SHH introduced a range of methodological and ethical questions and challenges. In my discussion of methods I described the development of my research approach and the ethical stance I have taken. I have also emphasised the fact that throughout the research process, researchers must be responsive to changing situations, and may find themselves engaged with stabilising (research) activity in the face of unexpected developments and challenges; this is both in relation to research design issues broadly, and ethical questions more specifically.

The unexpected events which occurred during my study underlined the uncertainties involved in engaging with online environments. Again, however, such uncertainties are similar to those arising in offline research, where the researcher is likely to face other challenges and surprises. The issues raised in this thesis therefore have the potential to be of interest to those with a broader interest in methodology.

In outlining my approach to ethics I have established and supported an argument for localised ethical decision making. This has been defined in relation to the nature of my research interests, questions, settings, and data collection strategies and supported by related methodological literature. This stance, and my defence of it in relation to these varied areas of my research, has been particularly important in respect of my decision to carry out ‘covert’ observation within COA and SHH – a decision which is controversial, but, I have argued, defensible within such public settings. The stance I have taken in defining a localised ethical position reflects a trend in the methodological literature which takes as its focus the practices of online research. I have suggested that this stance is to some extent at odds with the development of ethical regulations in other academic fields; this is particularly the case in respect of the increasing bureaucratisation of ethical practice in social science research.

Alongside my discussion of these issues, I have also been concerned with outlining the development of my analysis of data from COA and SHH. This is significant as the process of analysis is often under-explored in academic work. Consideration of the presentation of analysis is equally important and equally under-examined, and I have also taken a particular approach to this in the organisation of my analysis chapters. As I suggested in Chapter 3, there are marked differences in the form and structure of these chapters. These differences can be considered in terms of contrasting authorial genres; genres relating to the prevalence or explicitness of the language of description that is being introduced in each. Chapters 6 and 9, for example, take a narrative form which is, on the whole, more common to fan studies literature. In contrast, Chapters 7 and 8 take a more distanced, analytical approach which is far less common in this work. Together these produce an interesting and productive tension, marking an alliance between opposites, which Dowling has referred to as *pastiche* mode of interaction (Dowling, 2004a, in press). This mode involves a dialogue between contrasting voices without moves to close them down, enabling each to maintain its own voice.

Maintaining the integrity of these voices (see Dowling, in press) is significant because of the ‘affordances’ of each genre (what these genres *do*). In Chapters 7 and 8, the abstracted theoretical language is introduced explicitly, in relation to the data. This has the benefit of introducing a coherent language with which to consider the empirical data which is then presented, and brings the analysis to the foreground; this produces a level of abstraction which provides some distance from the empirical activity and thus enables moves between settings. In the more narrative based chapters the abstraction is less explicit, but still there. The empirical is, however, to some extent privileged in the presentation, my description of the activity on COA and SHH structured around the details of key events (although this description is clearly driven by a theorised way of conceptualising identity and community, for example, as discussed in Chapter 5). This enables the presentation of empirical richness, capturing elements of the activity that a focus on the development of the language of description might exclude. My discussion of fans’ responses to the *Silent Hill* film and *Serenity* as trans-media texts is one example of this, as these responses can be seen to offer an interesting empirical perspective on existing understandings of the processes and impact of ‘media convergence.’

The difference between these chapters and the genres which are privileged in each, resonates with the distinction between mapping and journeying that I introduced in relation to my approach to engaging with the sites in Chapter 3, a distinction which can here be considered in relation to de Certeau’s description of the differing views of the city obtained by the spectator at the top of a building and those walking below. The elevation of the former, de Certeau suggests:

transfigures [the spectator] into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was possessed into a text that lies before one’s eyes.” (de Certeau, 1988, 92)

The “*wandersmänner*” (walkers) in contrast, “follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it” (93). Together, then, the chapters provide empirical thickness and theoretical distance – moving between ‘the ground’ and a ‘view from above’ - which develops my understanding of SHH and COA from different levels of analysis.

10.2 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

It is important to recognise the limitations of the research presented in this thesis. One key issue, for example, relates to the collection of data from these sites. This can be considered in relation to the development of my research interest during the study. One aspect of this development involved my increasing interest in the careers of these sites and, in particular, the fluctuation of membership levels during destabilising events. In Chapter 9, for example, I presented posting and membership levels from SHH during the pre-and-post release of the *Silent Hill* film, an event which occurred towards the end of my study. Equivalent post counts during key events on COA – as well as earlier events on SHH (for example, the release of SH4) – would have strengthened my analysis. By this point, however, the opportunity to obtain earlier day-by-day levels had been lost; whilst it is possible to access some quantitative data on SHH on sites such as Alexa.com (which I used as a source in Chapter 9), I have not been able to find a site with similar information relating to COA. The data I have on membership levels on COA during the “Save Angel” campaign (for example), therefore involves snapshots of the forums as a whole, rather than daily statistics. This represents a weakness in my data collection strategy which can be attributed to the development of my analysis, my lack of foresight, and my limited early conceptualisation of the sort of data I might need from these sites. It also reflects the nature of the environments: it is yet another issue relating to the process of archiving website activity and corresponding issue of the types of data that it is/is not possible to retrieve from the past. Were I to undertake such work again, I would certainly take a broader approach to data from the outset.

As I stated in Chapter 3, my approach to sampling also involved a reduction in the modality of the data that I examined from these sites. My focus on written interactions means that the multimodal elements of the activity on SHH and COA have been excluded from my analysis. As a result of this, my research ignores a key element of the activity - the posting of images and creation of graphical banners and avatars -which is part of the individual identity creation and community formation on these sites. The decision to focus on written communication was based primarily on my interest in examining similar material across the two settings; the restricted use of images on COA meant that communication on the COA forums was predominantly through written text. Focusing solely on written posting activity therefore enabled comparisons across the

two sites. During the study I did, however, archive this data; consideration of the multimodal aspects of the forums at a later stage would be one way of developing and reflecting upon the analysis presented in this thesis.

As well as a reduction of modality, my sampling of posting activity on these sites is also limited by the focus on specific areas of the forums, and certain topics of discussion. The selection of this data was, as discussed in Chapter 3, due to my particular interest in the discussion of the fan objects and the broader management/regulation of the settings. However by focusing on these areas, this study has ignored certain parts of the activity on these sites. This includes much of the more ‘creative’ productivity which is evident on these COA and SHH (including the production of fan art and fan fiction), as well as more open general discussion. My selection of activity from these settings clearly impacts upon the image of fan activity that I have presented in this thesis. I would imagine, for example, that more open spaces for creativity might not have the same drive for closure that I have described in this thesis. My choice of research settings and objects of fan interest raises similar issues – COA and SHH might be regarded as somewhat conservative settings, in contrast to more open sites of activity which are not devoted to one main object (see Section 10.3). These concerns can, however, be qualified. I am not claiming that COA and SHH are representative of the whole Internet, or all fan cultures; my focus is on pedagogic practices, and it is here that the analysis has value beyond the local empirical settings I have explored. This differentiation has been suggested by Barry Glaser who suggests - in relation to generalising from qualitative research - that:

The real distinction is to contrast methods that generalize to a large population (unit sociology) to [sic] methods that generalize to a basic social process of scope and depth, one of which is grounded theory. For example, redesigning of life styles because of chronic illness can be further generalized to redesigning of life styles to a chronic condition in everyday life, e.g. occupational mobility. (Glaser, 1992, 107)

In a similar way to the process of generalisation that Glaser describes here, the language that I have developed in this thesis can be used to consider pedagogic activity in other settings. It is in relation to this that a number of potential implications of my research and possible future development of my work can be introduced.

10.3 FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

The work presented in this thesis could be extended and developed in a number of ways, both in relation to the research sites I have explored and new and different settings.

A number of issues have been raised in my discussion of the activity on COA and SHH which might be explored in more detail; one such example is the gendering of activity on these sites, which has not been a central concern of my thesis, but which has arisen at different points within my discussion. There is also clearly potential for exploration of the areas of COA and SHH that I have not examined in this work. The closure of the COA forums means that further exploration of this site would, however, be restricted to the data I have archived during this study. The closure of the COA forums also impacts upon the opportunity to make what, in the context of ethnographic research, Michael Burawoy has termed “revisits” (2003); this might involve a return to these settings at a later stage to examine how they have changed, and how my reading of them may have developed/shifted. Whilst I think this would be possible in the case of SHH (where discussion of the next *Silent Hill* game is starting to build and the site seems relatively secure), it would not be possible in the case of COA. Clearly however, there are other *Angel*-related sites which would provide the opportunity to examine how this fandom has dealt with the ending of its primary text. Remaining within COA and SHH at this point, and exploring the more general and open areas of discussion within the sites, would also present an opportunity to examine the regulation of practice when activity is not closely related to the fan objects. Of particular interest I think would be how this activity is regulated (particularly in the light of my discussion in Chapter 8).

As well as exploring different areas of these sites, taking a different methodological approach would enable me to explore issues and questions that I have not been able to examine in this study. By focusing on textual posting activity and not seeking to move beyond this, my work has represented a move away from the methodological focus on knowing subjects in much recent fan studies work. A possible next-stage development of my work would be to move closer to these subjects by using interviews to explore issues of pleasure and motivation. This would also enable me to ask methodological questions; contrasting analysis of interview data with my analysis of posting activity

might, for example, reveal interesting contradictions in my findings. As stated previously however, the use of interviews would not enable me to access the ‘real’ motivations (for example) of the participants of COA and SHH, but to explore a different aspect of the activity within a different research context.

Approaching the activity in a different way would also reveal different aspects of the practice on these sites. In terms of sampling, following individual users rather than events would enable me to explore the development of individual avatar identities over a period of engagement with the sites; following the careers of new members might, for example, provide interesting perspective on engagement within these sites, and enable me to explore processes of apprenticeship in more detail. A number of posters have appeared in different parts of this thesis, but my discussion of their participation and movement across the different areas of the forums is limited. Following the posting history in more detail would develop this understanding, enabling consideration of the consistency of avatar identities and modes of identification with the fan objects at an individual level. Taking this one step further, it would also be very interesting to examine the activities of these members across different websites; this would add another dimension to my study of fan and avatar identities, examining the configuration of identity as performed across diverse settings.

Moving beyond COA and SHH, it would also be worth exploring sites devoted to different sorts of objects, or practices. It might be interesting to compare such settings – which are, as I discussed in Chapter 7 devoted to fictional texts which can be thought of as relatively conservative in nature (easily inspiring, for example, modes of inhabitation and residence) – to sites based around activities rather than objects (the production of icons and avatars for example), or sites devoted to multiple objects and/or objects which are less textually coherent. Sites which rely on synchronous modes of communication might also offer interesting points of comparison.

10.4 IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Whilst the achievements of this thesis can be established in relation to existing empirical research on fans, my work also raises questions about sites of pedagogic activity both broadly. I have presented both COA and SHH as hierarchical, regulated

via the deployment of a range of authority strategies, and involving the in/exclusion of positions and identities in ways which define what can be said and who can speak with legitimacy within these settings. I have argued that these strategies do not just relate to modes of authority/regulation, but also to modes of identification and engagement with the objects of fan interest on these sites. Whilst I do not seek to foster the emancipatory drive within some of the work within cultural and media studies that I introduced in Chapter 2, I would suggest that the modality and patterning of activity described in this thesis raises interesting questions that might be asked of other pedagogic contexts in more formal domains.

The regulation and suturing of affiliation to an object - and with it the configuration of identity and community – can, for example, be considered in relation to subjects in face-to-face settings, and more traditional educational settings than COA and SHH. Lapping's (2004) relational conceptualisation of student positioning in relation to the academic disciplines of 'American Literature' and 'Political Thought' provides one point of comparison. Lapping describes the marginalisation and inclusion of students within undergraduate classes and argues that "in order to take up a successful position within the classroom students are required to identify with subject matter, methodologies and modes of participation" (Lapping, 2004, 215). The exclusion of participants on COA and SHH suggests that whilst the objects of attention in the settings she is describing here (undergraduate courses) differ from the fan objects on COA and SHH, similar moves are perhaps evident.

I began this thesis by describing work which has suggested that there are distinct differences between 'traditional' schooling and the practices of informal online settings. This literature has argued that the latter should be explored in order to both transfer specific innovations from online to offline domains and, more generally, to reinvigorate outmoded school-based practice. In closing, I would suggest that whilst there are indeed significant connotations for 'real world' teaching and learning to be found through the close examination of online environments, my analysis in this thesis suggests that these connotations are rooted more in similarity than difference.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX i.

THE “MYTH OF EMANCIPATION” IN THE STUDY OF POPULAR CULTURE

In an examination of the Pokémon phenomenon, Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2002) note the difference between the activity and “energy” associated with Pokémon and “the passivity that increasingly suffuses our children’s schooling” (2000)¹²⁶. These authors also note their hesitancy as to the ways in which such activity and such complexity should be read, warning:

against the view that ‘activity’ can necessarily be equated with independence or autonomy or power – or indeed that it should automatically be invested with political significance. (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2002, 396).

This cautionary tone can be contrasted to Gee’s “challenge to traditional schooling” in *Situated Literacy and Language* (2004), where Gee takes the same phenomenon as his empirical focus.¹²⁷ Gee recruits examples of children “mastering the Pokémon universe” to demonstrate that learning, in the context of popular entertainment forms, unlike in schools, is undistinguished by race/class/gender (Gee, 2004, 9). After providing details of the Pokémon system, Gee contrasts the challenges of learning the phonic system to the challenges of mastering the Pokémon; a system of “150 (Pokémon) coupled with 16 (types) coupled with 2 (evolutions) coupled with 8 Skills. (Gee, 2004, 9).” The suggestion is that the latter is far more taxing and that children’s ability to master it is testament to the sophistication of their engagement. Gee is here quick to identify with the children that are his reference points (his descriptions of engagements with media texts with and via his own child), and is also quick to move to reading technical capabilities from engagement, for example the suggestion that: “Since these children can identify one of 150 Pokémon by seeing only a small bit of it, this means that they have done a feature analysis of the whole system” (Gee, 2004, 9). Gee’s work seeks to validate the practices of children engaging with this media, but is undermined by the way in which it appears to celebrate the practice rather than interrogate it; it remains relatively anecdotal and raises numerous empirical questions

¹²⁶ Catherine Beavis makes a similar statement in relation to Australian rather than UK education system (2002, 49).

¹²⁷ Whilst the works on Pokémon mentioned above share common interest on a number of levels, there is no explicit referencing between them – why they are not speaking to (or at least acknowledging) each other, might be interesting to consider further elsewhere.

(how many students actually learn the whole system for example. How does the Pokémon system relate to the phonic system?).

Similar claims are found in work on the educational potential of videogames. Consider the following statement from the games researcher Kurt Squire;

entertainment games allow learners to interact with systems in increasingly complex ways. Digital game players can relive historical eras (as in *Pirates!*), investigate complex systems like the Earth's chemical & life cycles (*SimEarth*), govern island nations (*Tropico*), manage complex industrial empires (*Railroad Tycoon*), or, indeed, run an entire civilization (*Civilization* series). Or, they might travel in time to Ancient Greece (*Caesar I, II, & III*), Rome (*Age of Empires I, and II*), North America (*Colonization*), or manage an ant colony, farm, hospital, skyscraper, themepark, zoo, airport, or fast food chain. (Squire, 2002, url)

The identification of a range of experiences within the description of these games, serves to reveal the valued and validated content within popular media texts. This revelation of the legitimate challenges and experiences offered by the videogame can, as I noted in Chapter 2, be thought of as propagating a myth of emancipation which was described by Dowling in relation to the recognition of western practices within the “primitive” in work on ethnomathematics (1998, 15). In Squire’s description of these games, gaming takes on value because it enables access to a range of “other” more esoteric experiences than ‘mere’ game play. In each case, the recognition of value is identified within a practice from a perspective external to that practice. As I described in Chapter 2, we see similar moves within the work on media fans.

APPENDIX ii.

INTERNET ACTIVITY SURROUNDING ANGEL AND SILENT HILL.

Both *Angel* and *Silent Hill* have inspired a range of activity on the Internet.

There are a range of sites devoted to *Silent Hill* – the Huh? Radio webring (<http://www.whatthefun.net/radio/>) for example which links a number of Silent Hill fansites (including SHH), Yahoo Groups such as Silent Bebop! (http://games.groups.yahoo.com/group/Silent_Hill/), the pages devoted to *Silent Hill* on Konami's official site (<http://www.konami.com/gs/gameslist.php?genreid=10>), and gaming support sites such as Gamefaq* which provide a range of *Silent Hill* related walkthroughs and FAQs.

Angel's status as a spin-off from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* means that there is some intersection between *BtVS* and *Angel*-related fan activity on the Internet. Although there were a number of web rings devoted to the series, COA was the largest *Angel* fan site. There are also *Angel* pages on the sites of larger websites; these include the BBC's homepage for the series (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/cult/buffy/angel/>) and pages on television sites such as tv.com (see <http://www.tv.com/angel/show/12/summary.html>). During the campaign to save the series there were a number of sites devoted to the cause; these included www.angelfooddrive.com, www.saveangel.com, www.SavingAngel.org, and www.SupportAngel.org. The cancellation of the series means that the official forums for the series on the WB website (now the CW channel/website) is now closed.

APPENDIX iii.

DESCRIPTION OF THE HYPERION FORUMS, COA, 2005.

CITY OF ANGEL FORUMS

Rules of Use

All are welcome on the Hyperion forums but we would ask you to remember one or two things before selling your soul. Please take a moment to read the positing board rules (2 topics, 18 Posts)

THE HYPERION~A Forum for all things Angel

The CoA Codex

Angel or Spike? Fred or Cordelia? What are the best and worst moments from 5 years of Angel? Want to know the name of the episode where Wesley and Angel dance? Is there a song that keeps invading your mind but you don't know the name of it? Ask the CoA Codex an Angel question and the answers will....appear. (Topics 128, Posts 3037)

Quor'toth

What would have happened if Doyle had never sacrificed himself or if Holtz had never taken baby Connor into the Quor'toth? What would have happened if Darla had remained human? This is the 'what if' forum – a chance for you to come up with an alternative version of your Angelverse. (Topics, 49, Posts 1357)

Caritas

Relax with a sea breeze and your friends in Lorne's Bar. This Forum is for general discussion and can be about anything. Karaoke is optional but banter is a must. (247 topics, 14,115 posts)

THE ESPRESSO PUMP~A Forum for all thing Buffy

Slayer, Scoobies & Potentials

This forum is here to discuss anything from the seven seasons of the phenomenon that started it all Buffy the Vampire Slayer. (78 topics, 3269 posts)

SERENITY ~ A Forum for all things Firefly

Shiny Blue Sun

With the pending release of the latest Joss Whedon project, Serenity, to hit the big screen in 2005, here's a chance to talk about all things Firefly. (26 Topics, 357 posts)

VIP SUITE

From time to time the actual VIPs of Angel drop by to tell us what they are up to. The likes of composer Robert Kral, writer Jeff Mariotte, or musician Jymm Thomas of Darling Violetta are not uncommon to see here. The VIP Suite is where you will find them.

Topic and post counts are from April 2005.

APPENDIX iv.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SHH FORUMS, MARCH 2004.

Silent Hill Central

Silent Hill Town Centre

Introduce yourself to the other members in our town centre...

Silent Hill 1

Harrys' daughter has gone missing! Talk about where it all started here...

Silent Hill 2

The second game in the series, discuss James' quest for answers here...

Silent Hill 3

The third part of the Silent Hill saga. Talk about Heather and her journey here...

Silent Hill 4: The Room

Come here for all the latest about Konami's latest SH title, The Room . . .

This section will contain spoilers for those who have yet to play, so proceed with caution!

Silent Hill: Movie

Discuss the SH movie that's in the making right here...

Silent Hill General Discussion

Got a topic that doesn't fit in any of the above categories? Then post it here...

Daddy...Help me!

Stuck in a Silent Hill game? Seems like there's no way out? Seek help here...

Resort Area

Happy Burger

Talk about things in general in our fast food bar...

Silent Hill Post Office

Questions for the Admin/Mod Team - and all other forum queries - can be asked here...

Silent Hill Heaven

Check here for the latest news about the Silent Hill Heaven website. You may also use this section to post questions directly to the webmasters about the site. (This forum closed in September 2005)

Indian Runner

Share your Artwork and Literature with other members here...

Lakeside Amusement Park

Discuss your favourite game, music, movie or any other media here...

Your Special Place

Use this space to advertise your own slice of the Net.

YOU MUST HAVE AT LEAST 50 POSTS TO PLUG HERE.

Silent Hill Historical Society

The saved threads place. Visit the past here. Do not post new threads here!¹²⁸

¹²⁸ This forum was added after the forum flush.

Midwich Elementary School

Faculty Room

Admin/Mod room, for discussions regarding forum issues.

Library Reserve Room

Storage room for old or unwanted posts. Admin/Mod access only.

APPENDIX v.

THE PLACING OF GOOGLE ADS ON SHH

As noted in the glossary, the placement of GoogleAds on webpages are triggered by keywords – for example one might expect “*Silent Hill*” to be a keyword for those selling *Silent Hill* merchandise. Advertisers register these keywords and advertisements are placed on sites accordingly. Campaigns can also be targeted – as appears on a link at the bottom of the SHH site “Sign in and create a new campaign to target Silenthillforum.com.” Due to the at least partially targeted nature of the placement of advertisements, the type of products advertised on the site reflect the nature of the site (one which is now as configured as a consumer space). The adverts on SHH include sponsors from both US and UK domains for various products and services. These include software products/services (password storage/management, data archiving companies) Webhosting companies, online games retailers and rental companies (one of which is reached by a banner advert advertising the videogame *Second Sight*, others directly advertising *Silent Hill* titles), movie download companies and, interestingly, online psychics (“Online & Personal Psychic Readings as low as \$0.99 per minute”).

APPENDIX vi.

THE 'KLINGON FOREHEAD PROBLEM' IN DEEP SPACE NINE

The Klingon Forehead problem is referenced in the following scene from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*:

Quark: "Who ordered a Ractagino?"¹²⁹
Waitress: "The Klingons."
Quark (looks around): "The Klingons?"
Waitress: "Over there."
Bashir (confused): "Those are Klingons?"
Waitress (disbelieving): "Alright. You boys have had enough."
(Quark, Chief O'Brien, and Dr. Bashir turn to look at Lt. Cmdr Worf)
Quark: "Mr Worf?"
Worf: "They are Klingons. And it is a long story."
O'Brien: "What happened? Some kind of genetic engineering?"
Bashir: "A viral mutation?"
Worf: "We do not discuss it with outsiders."

("Trials and Tribble-ations," Episode 103, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*.)

In this episode, members of the crew of the Deep Space Nine have been sent back in time to the Enterprise by a Bajoran Time Orb. Here they encounter Kirk, Spock, Ahura, Scottie, via a melding of new and original episode footage. The episode plays with the notion of canonical knowledge and series history, and the problem of sustaining coherence over time. The dialogue referenced above plays upon the discontinuous appearance of Klingons throughout the *Star Trek* series. Worf (a Klingon) is here asked for an explanation of the discrepancy between the 'contemporary' understanding of what Klingons are/look like – with characteristic ridges on their foreheads - and the empirical evidence of historical Klingons that they are here presented with (smooth foreheads). This also presents textual coherency as the ideal (hence the confusion at the non-bumpy Klingons in the bar). The text can here be seen to be making a playful nod to an audience aware of a key (and controversial) fissure within the canon logic. This fissure is not explained away however but configured as an in-joke.

¹²⁹ Popular drink served during timeframe of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*.

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