Henry Jenkins

Convergence Culture

Where Old and New Media Collide

Updated and with a New Afterword

Intro pages 17-24

Ch. 2 pages 59-74

* affective economics
* lovemarks
* brands

Ch. 5 pages 175-186

New York University Press • *New York and London*

which media industries operate and by which media consumers process news and entertainment. Keep this in mind: convergence refers to a process, not an endpoint. There will be no single black box that controls the flow of media into our homes. Thanks to the proliferation of channels and the portability of new computing and telecommunications technologies, we are entering an era when media will be everywhere. Convergence isn't something that is going to happen one day when we have enough bandwidth or figure out the correct configuration of appliances. Ready or not, we are already living within a convergence culture.

Our cell phones are not simply telecommunications devices; they also allow us to play games, download information from the Internet, and take and send photographs or text messages. Increasingly they allow us to watch previews of new films, download installments of serialized novels, or attend concerts from remote locations. All of this is already happening in northern Europe and Asia. Any of these functions can also be performed using other media appliances. You can listen to the Dixie Chicks through your DVD player, your car radio, your Walkman, your iPod, a Web radio station, or a music cable channel.

Fueling this technological convergence is a shift in patterns of media ownership. Whereas old Hollywood focused on cinema, the new media conglomerates have controlling interests across the entire entertainment industry. Warner Bros. produces film, television, popular music, computer games, Web sites, toys, amusement park rides, books, newspapers, magazines, and comics.

In turn, media convergence impacts the way we consume media. A teenager doing homework may juggle four or five windows, scan the Web, listen to and download MP3 files, chat with friends, word-process a paper, and respond to e-mail, shifting rapidly among tasks. And fans of a popular television series may sample dialogue, summarize episodes, debate subtexts, create original fan fiction, record their own soundtracks, make their own movies—and distribute all of this worldwide via the Internet.

Convergence is taking place within the same appliances, within the same franchise, within the same company, within the brain of the consumer, and within the same fandom. Convergence involves both a change in the way media is produced and a change in the way media is consumed.

The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence

Another snapshot of the future: Anthropologist Mizuko Ito has documented the growing place of mobile communications among Japanese youth, describing young couples who remain in constant contact with each other throughout the day, thanks to their access to various mobile technologies.[18] They wake up together, work together, eat together, and go to bed together even though they live miles apart and may have face-to-face contact only a few times a month. We might call it telecocooning.

Convergence doesn't just involve commercially produced materials and services traveling along well-regulated and predictable circuits. It doesn't just involve the mobile companies getting together with the film companies to decide when and where we watch a newly released film. It also occurs when people take media in their own hands. Entertainment content isn't the only thing that flows across multiple media platforms. Our lives, relationships, memories, fantasies, desires also flow across media channels. Being a lover or a mommy or a teacher occurs on multiple platforms.[19] Sometimes we tuck our kids into bed at night and other times we Instant Message them from the other side of the globe.

And yet another snapshot: Intoxicated students at a local high school use their cell phones spontaneously to produce their own soft-core porn movie involving topless cheerleaders making out in the locker room. Within hours, the movie is circulating across the school, being downloaded by students and teachers alike and watched between classes on personal media devices.

When people take media into their own hands, the results can be wonderfully creative; they can also be bad news for all involved.

For the foreseeable future, convergence will be a kind of kludge—a jerry-rigged relationship among different media technologies—rather than a fully integrated system. Right now, the cultural shifts, the legal battles, and the economic consolidations that are fueling media convergence are preceding shifts in the technological infrastructure. How those various transitions unfold will determine the balance of power in the next media era.

The American media environment is now being shaped by two seemingly contradictory trends: on the one hand, new media technologies

have lowered production and distribution costs, expanded the range of available delivery channels, and enabled consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways. At the same time, there has been an alarming concentration of the ownership of mainstream commercial media, with a small handful of multinational media conglomerates dominating all sectors of the entertainment industry. No one seems capable of describing both sets of changes at the same time, let alone showing how they impact each other. Some fear that media is out of control, others that it is too controlled. Some see a world without gatekeepers, others a world where gatekeepers have unprecedented power. Again, the truth lies somewhere in between.

Another snapshot: People around the world are affixing stickers showing Yellow Arrows (http://global.yellowarrow.net) alongside public monuments and factories, beneath highway overpasses, onto lamp posts. The arrows provide numbers others can call to access recorded voice messages—personal annotations on our shared urban landscape. They use it to share a beautiful vista or criticize an irresponsible company. And increasingly, companies are co-opting the system to leave their own advertising pitches.

Convergence, as we can see, is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Corporate convergence coexists with grassroots convergence. Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets, and reinforce viewer commitments. Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers. The promises of this new media environment raise expectations of a freer flow of ideas and content. Inspired by those ideals, consumers are fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture. Sometimes, corporate and grassroots convergence reinforce each other, creating closer, more rewarding relations between media producers and consumers. Sometimes, these two forces are at war, and those struggles will redefine the face of American popular culture.

Convergence requires media companies to rethink old assumptions about what it means to consume media, assumptions that shape both programming and marketing decisions. If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active. If old consumers

were predictable and stayed where you told them to stay, then new consumers are migratory, showing a declining loyalty to networks or media. If old consumers were isolated individuals, the new consumers are more socially connected. If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now noisy and public.

Media producers are responding to these newly empowered consumers in contradictory ways, sometimes encouraging change, sometimes resisting what they see as renegade behavior. And consumers, in turn, are perplexed by what they see as mixed signals about how much and what kinds of participation they can enjoy.

As they undergo this transition, the media companies are not behaving in a monolithic fashion; often, different divisions of the same company are pursuing radically different strategies, reflecting their uncertainty about how to proceed. On the one hand, convergence represents an expanded opportunity for media conglomerates, since content that succeeds in one sector can spread across other platforms. On the other, convergence represents a risk since most of these media fear a fragmentation or erosion of their markets. Each time they move a viewer from television to the Internet, say, there is a risk that the consumer may not return.

Industry insiders use the term "extension" to refer to their efforts to expand the potential markets by moving content across different delivery systems, "synergy" to refer to the economic opportunities represented by their ability to own and control all of those manifestations, and "franchise" to refer to their coordinated effort to brand and market fictional content under these new conditions. Extension, synergy, and franchising are pushing media industries to embrace convergence. For that reason, the case studies I selected for this book deal with some of the most successful franchises in recent media history. Some (*American Idol*, 2002, and *Survivor*, 2000) originate on television, some (*The Matrix*, 1999, *Star Wars*, 1977) on the big screen, some as books (*Harry Potter*, 1998), and some as games (*The Sims*, 2000), but each extends outward from its originating medium to influence many other sites of cultural production. Each of these franchises offers a different vantage point from which to understand how media convergence is reshaping the relationship between media producers and consumers.

Chapter 1, which focuses on *Survivor*, and chapter 2, which centers on *American Idol*, look at the phenomenon of reality television. Chapter 1 guides readers through the little-known world of *Survivor* spoilers—a

group of active consumers who pool their knowledge to try to unearth the series's many secrets before they are revealed on the air. *Survivor* spoiling will be read here as a particularly vivid example of collective intelligence at work. Knowledge communities form around mutual intellectual interests; their members work together to forge new knowledge often in realms where no traditional expertise exists; the pursuit of and assessment of knowledge is at once communal and adversarial. Mapping how these knowledge communities work can help us better understand the social nature of contemporary media consumption. They can also give us insight into how knowledge becomes power in the age of media convergence.

On the other hand, chapter 2 examines *American Idol* from the perspective of the media industry, trying to understand how reality television is being shaped by what I call "affective economics." The decreasing value of the thirty-second commercial in an age of TiVos and VCRs is forcing Madison Avenue to rethink its interface with the consuming public. This new "affective economics" encourages companies to transform brands into what one industry insider calls "lovemarks" and to blur the line between entertainment content and brand messages. According to the logic of affective economics, the ideal consumer is active, emotionally engaged, and socially networked. Watching the advert or consuming the product is no longer enough; the company invites the audience inside the brand community. Yet, if such affiliations encourage more active consumption, these same communities can also become protectors of brand integrity and thus critics of the companies that seek to court their allegiance.

Strikingly, in both cases, relations between producers and consumers are breaking down as consumers seek to act upon the invitation to participate in the life of the franchises. In the case of *Survivor*, the spoiler community has become so good at the game that the producers fear they will be unable to protect the rights of other consumers to have a "first time" experience of the unfolding series. In the case of *American Idol*, fans fear that their participation is marginal and that producers still play too active a role in shaping the outcome of the competition. How much participation is too much? When does participation become interference? And conversely, when do producers exert too much power over the entertainment experience?

Chapter 3 examines *The Matrix* franchise as an example of what I am calling transmedia storytelling. Transmedia storytelling refers to a new

aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence—one that places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities. Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience. Some would argue that the Wachowski brothers, who wrote and directed the three *Matrix* films, have pushed transmedia storytelling farther than most audience members were prepared to go.

Chapters 4 and 5 take us deeper into the realm of participatory culture. Chapter 4 deals with *Star Wars* fan filmmakers and gamers, who are actively reshaping George Lucas's mythology to satisfy their own fantasies and desires. Fan cultures will be understood here as a revitalization of the old folk culture process in response to the content of mass culture. Chapter 5 deals with young *Harry Potter* fans who are writing their own stories about Hogwarts and its students. In both cases, these grassroots artists are finding themselves in conflict with commercial media producers who want to exert greater control over their intellectual property. We will see in chapter 4 that LucasArts has had to continually rethink its relations to *Star Wars* fans throughout the past several decades, trying to strike the right balance between encouraging the enthusiasm of their fans and protecting their investments in the series. Interestingly, as *Star Wars* moves across media channels, different expectations about participation emerge, with the producers of the *Star Wars Galaxies* game encouraging consumers to generate much of the content even as the producers of the *Star Wars* movies issue guidelines enabling and constraining fan participation.

Chapter 5 extends this focus on the politics of participation to consider two specific struggles over *Harry Potter*: the conflicting interests between *Harry Potter* fans and Warner Bros., the studio that acquired the film rights to J. K. Rowling's books, and the conflict between conservative Christian critics of the books and teachers who have seen them as a means of encouraging young readers. This chapter maps a range of responses to the withering of traditional gatekeepers and the expansion of fantasy into many different parts of our everyday lives. On the one hand, some conservative Christians are striking back against media convergence and globalization, reasserting traditional

authority in the face of profound social and cultural change. On the other hand, some Christians embrace convergence through their own forms of media outreach, fostering a distinctive approach to media literacy education and encouraging the emergence of Christian-inflected fan cultures.

Throughout these five chapters, I will show how entrenched institutions are taking their models from grassroots fan communities, and reinventing themselves for an era of media convergence and collective intelligence—how the advertising industry has been forced to reconsider consumers' relations to brands, the military is using multiplayer games to rebuild communications between civilians and service members, the legal profession has struggled to understand what "fair use" means in an era when many more people are becoming authors, educators are reassessing the value of informal education, and at least some conservative Christians are making their peace with newer forms of popular culture. In each of these cases, powerful institutions are trying to build stronger connections with their constituencies and consumers are applying skills learned as fans and gamers to work, education, and politics.

Chapter 6 will turn from popular culture to public culture, applying my ideas about convergence to offer a perspective on the 2004 American presidential campaign, exploring what it might take to make democracy more participatory. Again and again, citizens were better served by popular culture than they were by news or political discourse; popular culture took on new responsibilities for educating the public about the stakes of this election and inspiring them to participate more fully in the process. In the wake of a divisive campaign, popular media may also model ways we can come together despite our differences. The 2004 elections represent an important transitional moment in the relationship between media and politics as citizens are being encouraged to do much of the dirty work of the campaign and the candidates and parties lost some control over the political process. Here again, all sides are assuming greater participation by citizens and consumers, yet they do not yet agree on the terms of that participation.

In my conclusion, I will return to my three key terms—convergence, collective intelligence, and participation. I want to explore some of the implications of the trends I will be discussing in this book for education, media reform, and democratic citizenship. I will be returning there to a core claim: that convergence culture represents a shift in the

ways we think about our relations to media, that we are making that shift first through our relations with popular culture, but that the skills we acquire through play may have implications for how we learn, work, participate in the political process, and connect with other people around the world.

I will be focusing throughout this book on the competing and contradictory ideas about participation that are shaping this new media culture. Yet, I must acknowledge that not all consumers have access to the skills and resources needed to be full participants in the cultural practices I am describing. Increasingly, the digital divide is giving way to concern about the participation gap. Throughout the 1990s, the primary question was one of access. Today, most Americans have some limited access to the Internet, say, though for many, that access is through the public library or the local school. Yet many of the activities this book will describe depend on more extended access to those technologies, a greater familiarity with the new kinds of social interactions they enable, a fuller mastery over the conceptual skills that consumers have developed in response to media convergence. As long as the focus remains on access, reform remains focused on technologies; as soon as we begin to talk about participation, the emphasis shifts to cultural protocols and practices.

Most of the people depicted in this book are early adopters. In this country they are disproportionately white, male, middle class, and college educated. These are people who have the greatest access to new media technologies and have mastered the skills needed to fully participate in these new knowledge cultures. I don't assume that these cultural practices will remain the same as we broaden access and participation. In fact, expanding participation necessarily sparks further change. Yet, right now, our best window into convergence culture comes from looking at the experience of these early settlers and first inhabitants. These elite consumers exert a disproportionate influence on media culture in part because advertisers and media producers are so eager to attract and hold their attention. Where they go, the media industry is apt to follow; where the media industry goes, these consumers are apt to be found. Right now, both are chasing their own tails.

You are now entering convergence culture. It is not a surprise that we are not yet ready to cope with its complexities and contradictions. We need to find ways to negotiate the changes taking place. No one group can set the terms. No one group can control access and participation.

Don't expect the uncertainties surrounding convergence to be resolved anytime soon. We are entering an era of prolonged transition and transformation in the way media operates. Convergence describes the process by which we will sort through those options. There will be no magical black box that puts everything in order again. Media producers will find their way through their current problems only by renegotiating their relationship with their consumers. Audiences, empowered by these new technologies, occupying a space at the intersection between old and new media, are demanding the right to participate within the culture. Producers who fail to make their peace with this new participatory culture will face declining goodwill and diminished revenues. The resulting struggles and compromises will define the public culture of the future.

1

Spoiling *Survivor*

The Anatomy of a Knowledge Community

Survivor (2000)—the astonishingly popular CBS show that started the reality television trend—does not just pit sixteen strangers against one another. Around each carefully crafted episode emerges another contest—a giant cat and mouse game that is played between the producers and the audience. Every week, the eagerly anticipated results are fodder for water cooler discussions and get reported as news, even on rival networks. *Survivor* is television for the Internet age—designed to be discussed, dissected, debated, predicted, and critiqued.

The *Survivor* winner is one of television's most tightly guarded secrets. Executive producer Mark Burnett engages in disinformation campaigns trying to throw smoke in viewers' eyes. Enormous fines are written into the contracts for the cast and crew members if they get caught leaking the results. And so a fascination has grown up around the order of the "boots" (the sequence in which the contestants get rejected from the tribe), the "final four" (the last four contestants in the competition), and especially around the "sole survivor" (the final winner of the million-dollar cash prize).

The audience is one of the largest in broadcast television. In its first eight seasons, *Survivor* rarely dipped out of the top ten highest-rated shows. The most hard-core fans, a contingent known as the "spoilers," go to extraordinary lengths to ferret out the answers. They use satellite photographs to locate the base camp. They watch the taped episodes, frame by frame, looking for hidden information. They know *Survivor* inside out, and they are determined to figure it out—together—before the producers reveal what happened. They call this process "spoiling."

Mark Burnett acknowledges this contest between producer and fans is part of what creates *Survivor*'s mystique: "With so much of our show shrouded in secrecy until it's broadcast, it makes complete sense that many individuals consider it a challenge to try to gain information

toward the collaborative production and evaluation of knowledge. This bottom-up process potentially generated greater interest in the series, amplifying these fans' investment in the aired material. But, insofar as it interfered with or reshaped the informational economy around a series, it also threatened the producer's ability to control public response.

What we need to keep in mind here and throughout the book is that the interests of producers and consumers are not the same. Sometimes they overlap. Sometimes they conflict. The communities that on one level are the producer's best allies on another level may be their worst enemies. In the next chapter, we will reverse perspectives—looking at the audiences of reality television from the vantage point of program producers and advertisers. In this way, we will come to understand how entertainment companies are reappraising the economic value of fan participation.

2

Buying into *American Idol*

How We Are Being Sold on Reality Television

Who would have predicted that reality television series, such as *Survivor* (2000) and *American Idol* (2002), would turn out to be the first killer application of media convergence—the big new thing that demonstrated the power that lies at the intersection between old and new media? Initial experiments with interactive television in the mid-1990s were largely written off as failures. Most people didn't want to stop watching television just to buy the clothes one of the *Friends* (1994) was wearing. Few were interested in trivia quizzes flashing up at the bottom of the screen during sportscasts or James Bond movies. Critics argued that most of us simply wanted to sit back and watch television rather than interact with it. The current success of reality television is forcing the media industry to rethink some of those assumptions. The shift is one from real-time interaction toward asynchronous participation.

Few can argue with *American Idol*'s success. By the final weeks of its second 2003 season, FOX Broadcasting Company was receiving more than 20 million telephone calls or text messages per episode casting verdicts on the *American Idol* contestants.[1] This made the phone companies happy because they have been trying to find a way to get Americans more excited about text messaging, which hasn't taken off in the United States the way it has in Asia and northern Europe. Of the 140 million mobile phones in the United States today, only 27 million are being used for text messaging.[2] AT&T Wireless reported that roughly a third of those who participated in *American Idol* through text messaging had never sent a text message before.[3] As an AT&T spokesman explained, "Our venture with FOX has done more to educate the public and get people texting than any marketing activity in this country to date."[4]

American Idol commanded two of the top five time slots throughout the important May 2003 sweeps period. More than 40 million people

watched the final segment of the final episode of *American Idol*'s second season. By the third season, FOX devoted 13.5 hours to *American Idol* during the crucial May sweeps period, representing nearly one quarter of their total prime-time schedule for the month.[5]

This made advertisers happy. As MediaCom chief executive Jon Mandel explains, "We know when people are watching a show they care about, they tend to watch commercials more. Unfortunately, there aren't that many shows people care about."[6] *American Idol*, based on the successful British series *Pop Idol*, was sold to FOX through an aggressive campaign by the Creative Artists Agency, which saw the series as an ideal match for their client, Coca-Cola, and its 12–24-year-old target audience.[7] And what a match it has been. For those of you without a television or a teenage offspring, *American Idol* is a showcase of unknown singers—some good, some very bad—from around the country. Each week, the finalists perform and the audience votes out one contestant. In the end, the surviving performer gets a record contract and a promotion deal. *Forbes* ranked *American Idol* as the most profitable of all reality series, estimating that it had netted the network more than $260 million in profits by the end of its third season.[8]

All of this really made the networks happy. Reality television programs hold their own during the summer months, when network viewership is traditionally at its lowest ebb. And, as importantly, reality television has been a savior as broadcast networks try to resist cable television's attempts to siphon away their core audience. In 2002, for the first time, the cable networks' combined share outstripped that of the broadcast networks. No given cable channel has had the power and reach of a CBS, NBC, or ABC, but year by year broadcast networks become less central to their viewership. Overall, television audiences in summer decline 8–10 percent, but the major networks lost 30 percent of their market in the summer of 2002.[9] Cable networks like Showtime or HBO use the summer months to launch new episodes of their hot sitcoms (such as *Sex and the City*, 1998) and dramas (such as *Six Feet Under*, 2001), pitting them against broadcast network reruns. Viewers tend to remain with cable once the fall season starts. So, the broadcast networks are countering by offering more original programming in the summer, with the less-expensive reality television programs becoming their best weapon. When they are successful, reality series generate as much or more buzz than the cable shows they are competing against and thus slow viewership erosion. Even if a reality series doesn't make

ratings history, as the first seasons of *Survivor* and *American Idol* did, its lower returns are almost always better than the network would get on a rerun. The trade-off is that reality programs have a shorter shelf life and limited life-after-syndication, though they can represent significant sales when sold directly to consumers on DVD.

And this makes the media conglomerates happier still, since *American Idol* was from the start not simply a television program but a transmedia franchise. The show's first-season winner, Kelly Clarkson, signed to RCA Records and had an immediate number 1 hit single on the Billboard Hot 100, "A Moment Like This." The song went on to become the top-selling U.S. single for 2002. Kelly's initial singles got played more than 80,000 times on radio stations in 2002. An *American Idol* book made the best-seller list,[10] and the *American Idol* contestants played to sold-out houses on their nationwide concert tour. Production began im-mediately on a feature-length movie, *From Justin to Kelly* (2003), though the film ultimately generated low box-office returns.

Not everyone, however, was enchanted with *American Idol*'s success. Speaking for many critics of reality television, Karla Peterson ranted in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*:

> *American Idol* was not a dumb summer fling, but a conniving multimedia monster. Shameless product placement. Bloodless nostalgia. Incestuous corporate hype. Like the show's Stepford divas—who dutifully parroted every shriek, quiver and growl from the Mariah Carey catalog—*American Idol* has absorbed the sins of our debauched culture and spit them out in a lump of reconstituted evil. And because we were so dazzled by its brazen lack of redeeming qualities, we stepped over the mess and happily followed it over the abyss.[11]

Peterson is correct that *American Idol* was shaped at every level by blatant commercial calculations. Yet, her moral outrage doesn't take us very far toward understanding its appeal to the networks, advertisers, or consumers.

To understand *American Idol*'s success, we need to better understand the changed context within which American broadcasting is operating and the changed model of consumer behavior shaping programming and marketing strategies. We need to know more about what I am calling "affective economics." By affective economics, I mean a new configuration of marketing theory, still somewhat on the fringes but gaining

ground within the media industry, which seeks to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions. In many ways, affective economics represents an attempt to catch up with work in cultural studies over the last several decades on fan communities and viewer commitments. There is a crucial difference, however: the cultural studies work sought to understand media consumption from the fan's point of view, articulating desires and fantasies that were ill-served by the current media system; the new marketing discourse seeks to mold those consumer desires to shape purchasing decisions. While they are increasingly interested in the qualities of audience experience, the media and brand companies still struggle with the economic side of affective economics—the need to quantify desire, to measure connections, and to commodify commitments—and perhaps most importantly of all, the need to transform all of the above into return on investment (ROI). These bottom-line pressures often deflect attempts to understand the complexity of audience behavior even when such knowledge is desperately needed by companies that want to survive in the coming decades. Rather than rethinking the terms of their analysis, they are struggling to fit these new insights into familiar economic categories. It is still a world where what can be counted is what counts most.

Arguably, fans of certain cult television shows may gain greater influence over programming decisions in an the age of affective economics. From time to time, networks reprioritize certain segments of their audience, and the result is a shift in program strategies to more fully reflect those tastes—a shift from rural to urban viewers changed television content in the 1960s, a renewed interest in minority viewers led to more Afrocentric sitcoms throughout the 1990s, and a shift toward an emphasis on loyal viewers has been changing what reaches the air in the early twenty-first century. Fans are seeing more shows reflecting their tastes and interests reaching the air; those shows are being designed to maximize elements that appeal to fans; and those shows that fans like are apt to remain on the air longer because they are more likely to get renewed in borderline cases. Here's the paradox: to be desired by the networks is to have your tastes commodified. On the one hand, to be commodified expands a group's cultural visibility. Those groups that have no recognized economic value get ignored. That said, commodification is also a form of exploitation. Those groups that are commodified find themselves targeted more aggressively by

marketers and often feel they have lost control over their own culture, since it is mass produced and mass marketed. One cannot help but have conflicted feelings because one doesn't want to go unrepresented —but one doesn't want to be exploited, either.

For years, fan groups, seeking to rally support for endangered series, have argued that networks should be focused more on the quality of audience engagement with the series and less on the quantity of viewers. Increasingly, advertisers and networks are coming to more or less the same conclusion. Marketers seek to shape brand reputations, not through an individual transaction but through the sum total of interactions with the customer—an ongoing process that increasingly occurs across a range of different media "touch points." They don't simply want to get a consumer to make a single purchase, but rather to build a long-term relationship with a brand. New models of marketing seek to expand consumers' emotional, social, and intellectual investments, with the goal of shaping consumption patterns. In the past, media producers spoke of "impressions." Now, they are exploring the concept of audience "expressions," trying to understand how and why audiences re-act to the content. Marketing gurus argue that building a committed "brand community" may be the surest means of expanding consumer loyalty and that product placements will allow brands to tap some of the affective force of the affiliated entertainment properties. For this reason, shows such as *American Idol* are being watched closely by advertisers, marketing companies, television networks, and trade press reporters, all eager to understand how corporate convergence strategies may be reshaping the branding process. Early evidence suggests that the most valuable consumers are what the industry calls "loyals," or what we call fans. Loyals are more apt to watch series faithfully, more apt to pay attention to advertising, and more apt to buy products.

For the moment, I want readers to bracket their anxieties about consumerism and their fear of Madison Avenue. I do not intend this chapter to be in any simple sense an endorsement of or apology for the changes that are taking place. My own view is that this emerging discourse of affective economics has both positive and negative implications: allowing advertisers to tap the power of collective intelligence and direct it toward their own ends, but at the same time allowing consumers to form their own kind of collective bargaining structure that they can use to challenge corporate decisions. I will return to this issue of consumer power in the concluding chapter of this book. Even if you

want to criticize the way American capitalism works, you need to recognize that the models of marketing depicted in classic accounts, such as Vance Packard's *Hidden Persuaders* (1957), no longer adequately describe the way the media industries are operating.[12] Even if you believe that fan and brand communities lack the clout to significantly alter corporate behavior, you still need to understand the way participation works within this new affective economy so that you can direct criticisms at the actual mechanisms by which Madison Avenue seeks to reshape our hearts and minds.

At industry gatherings around the country, corporate visionaries and brand gurus are promoting what I am calling affective economics as the solution to a perceived crisis in American broadcasting—a crisis brought about by shifts in media technology that are granting viewers much greater control over the flow of media into their homes. Affective economics sees active audiences as potentially valuable if they can be courted and won over by advertisers. In this chapter, we will be looking more closely at the ways that advertisers and networks think about their audiences in the age of media convergence and the ways those assumptions about branding, audience commitment, and social viewing are shaping series such as *American Idol*. *American Idol* offers up a fantasy of empowerment—"America" gets to "decide" upon the next Idol. This promise of participation helps build fan investments, but it may also lead to misunderstandings and disappointments as viewers feel that their votes have not been counted.

"Impress Me"

An advertisement created several years ago for Apple Box Productions, Inc., depicts the new youth consumer: his straggling dishwater-blond hair hangs down into his glaring eyes, his mouth is turned down into a challenging sneer, and his finger is posed over the remote (fig. 2.1). "You've got three seconds. Impress me," he says.[13] One false move and he will zap us. No longer a couch potato (if he ever was), he determines what, when, and how he watches media. He is itinerant—free of commitments to any particular series, going where his fancy takes him.

The word "impress" serves double duty here, depending if it is read from the consumer's point of view or the marketer's. It refers to the consumer's search for something so "impressive" that he pauses his

relentless search for novelty. It also refers to the "impression" that is the unit of measurement historically deployed by the networks in their conversations with potential sponsors—the raw number of "eyeballs" watching a television program at a specific moment in time. What interests me here is the way the cultural and economic, and the consumer and corporate, meanings intersect. How does the viewer's search for compelling content translate into exposure to sponsored messages?

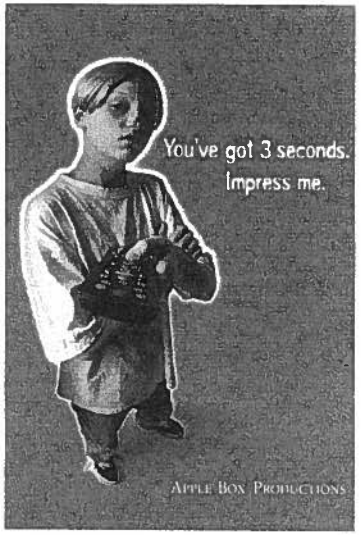

Fig. 2.1. The advertising industry depicts its toughest challenge: the young male consumer as channel zapper.

Much fuss was made a few years back about the ineffectiveness of banner advertising on the Web because the "click through" rate was so low. Relatively few people who saw the banner were following its link and purchasing the product. If television advertising had been judged by that same standard, it would have been found to be equally ineffective. The impression is not a measurement of how many people buy the product or even comprehend the message; it is purely a measurement of how many people have the set tuned to a particular channel. The impression is an even looser measurement when applied to other media. For example, the impressions created by a billboard are measured in terms of the sheer number of cars that drive by a particular intersection. According to marketing researcher Robert Kozinets, "It is not only that the impression is a clumsy way to track media insights. . . . The impression is a symptom of the larger business misunderstanding about what can be tracked, understood, and related back to particular investments."[14] Advertisers, however, are increasingly demanding accountability from media outlets for the degree of actual exposure they receive and for the quality of relationship this creates with their consumers. They want to understand how effective different media are about getting their messages before their potential buyers.

Just as the clumsiness of audience measurements have been exposed,

the networks have also witnessed a breakdown in viewer loyalty—the problem posed by our shaggy-haired young friend. First, there has been a proliferation of media options—a move from three major networks to a cable environment with hundreds of more specialized channels and the introduction of alternative forms of home entertainment, including the Internet, video, DVD, and computer and video games. Initially, the amount of time people spent consuming media each day expanded as the range of media options grew, but this expansion could only go so far given what a large portion of time the average consumer spent engaged with entertainment content outside of work, school, or sleep. Confronted with seemingly infinite variety, the average consumer settled into a pattern of watching ten to fifteen different media outlets. Broadcast programming still commands a higher degree of loyalty than cable programming, but the major broadcast networks are attracting a smaller slice of the pie as audience fragmentation continues. In the 1960s, an advertiser could reach 80 percent of U.S. women with a prime-time spot on the three networks. Today, it has been estimated that the same spot would have to run on one hundred TV channels to reach the same number of viewers.[15]

As advertisers grow anxious about whether network programming can reach audiences, they are diversifying their advertising budgets and looking to extend their brands across multiple distribution outlets that they hope will allow them to target a diverse selection of smaller niche markets. As Sumner Redstone, chairman of Viacom, told *Businessweek*, "What advertisers buy is platforms to get their brand promoted, and we've got four platforms for them. We're everywhere, because in this day and age you have to be where advertisers need to be."[16] A researcher for Forrester Research summarized the trends: "Monolithic blocks of eyeballs are gone. In their place is a perpetually shifting mosaic of audience microsegments that forces marketers to play an endless game of audience hide-and-seek."[17]

Next-generation technologies—especially the digital videorecorder (DVR)—are enabling more and more consumers to skip commercials. Right now, 43 percent of VCR-using households are skipping adverts, and many in the media industry are terrified of what's going to happen when technologies such as TiVo, which Nielsen Media Research president Susan Whiting calls "the VCR on steroids," becomes more widespread.[18] Current users of digital video recorders scan through

commercials about 59 percent of the time.[19] This doesn't mean that 59 percent of users skip commercials; it means that the average consumer watches about 41 percent of the aired advertisements. *Advertising Age* reporter Scott Donaton explains: "As advertisers lose the ability to invade the home, and consumers' minds, they will be forced to wait for an invitation. This means that they have to learn what kinds of advertising content customers will actually be willing to seek out and receive."[20]

Rishad Tobaccowala, president of the media-buying group Starcom MediaVest, sparked panic at a gathering of television executives in 2002 when he made what turned out to be the premature prediction that the thirty-second commercial would be dead by 2005. FOX Television chairman Sandy Grushow argued that the networks are nowhere near prepared for such a development: "Not only will everyone have to get drenched, but struck by lightning before significant progress is made."[21] As network executives search for their umbrellas, product placements are the most oft-discussed alternative, though no one really believes they can replace the $8 billion spent each year on commercials. For this transformation to occur, Lee Gabler, co-chairman and partner of Creative Artists Agency, argued, "The biggest hurdle we have to go over . . . is the integration of the networks, the studios, the ad agencies, the advertisers, the talent agencies, and anybody else that's involved in this space. We must be able to sit down collectively and cooperatively to come up with a solution. Right now, the ad agencies are frightened about anybody getting in their space, the networks are in denial, and the advertisers don't have a solution."[22]

In this context, the American viewing public is becoming harder and harder to impress. The television industry is increasingly focusing on understanding consumers who have a prolonged relationship and active engagement with media content, who show a willingness to track down that content across the cable spectrum and across a range of other media platforms. Such consumers, they believe, represent their best hope for the future. This next-generation audience research focuses attention on what consumers do with media content once it has passed across their eyeballs, seeing each subsequent interaction as valuable because it reinforces their relationship to the series and, potentially, its sponsors. Responding to that demand, Initiative Media, a company that advises many of the Fortune 500 companies about their adver-

tising placement, advocates an alternative approach to audience measurement they call "expression."[23] Expression charts attentiveness to programming and advertising, time spent with the program, and the degree of viewer loyalty and affinity to the program and its sponsors. Their concept of expression emerged through collaboration with the MIT Comparative Media Studies Program. Expression may start at the level of the individual consumer, but by definition it situates consumption within a larger social and cultural context. Consumers not only watch media; they also share media with one another, whether this consists of wearing a T-shirt proclaiming their passion for a particular product, posting a message on a discussion list recommending a product to a friend, or creating a parody of a commercial that circulates on the Internet. Expression can be seen as an investment in the brand and not simply an exposure to it.

Lovemarks and Emotional Capital

Delivering the keynote address at *Advertising Age*'s Madison + Vine conference on February 5, 2003, Coca-Cola president Steven J. Heyer outlined his vision for the future relations between the advertising ("Madison") and the entertainment industries ("Vine"). His speech offers a glimpse into the thinking of one of *American Idol*'s primary sponsors.[24] Heyer opened by identifying a range of problems that "demand a new approach to connecting with audiences" and force a rethinking of the old mass media paradigm: "The fragmentation and proliferation of media, and the consolidation in media ownership—soon to be followed by a wholesale unbundling. The erosion of mass markets. The empowerment of consumers who now have an unrivaled ability to edit and avoid advertising and to shift day parts. A consumer trend toward mass customization and personalization." Confronting profound shifts in consumer behavior, Heyer then outlined what he saw as his "convergence" strategy—the greater collaboration between content providers and sponsors to shape the total entertainment package. The focus, he argued, should be less on the content per se than on the "why, where, and how" the various entertainment media are brought together and the relationship that gets brokered with the consumer. As he explained, "Imagine if we used our collective tool kit to create an ever-expanding variety of interactions for people that—over time—built a relationship, an ongoing series of transactions, that is unique, differentiated and deeper" than any the entertainment industry has offered before.

Heyer's speech evokes the logic of brand extension, the idea that successful brands are built by exploiting multiple contacts between the brand and consumer. The strength of a connection is measured in terms of its emotional impact. The experience should not be contained within a single media platform, but should extend across as many media as possible. Brand extension builds on audience interest in particular content to bring them into contact again and again with an associated brand. Following this logic, Coca-Cola sees itself less as a soft drink bottler and more as an entertainment company that actively shapes as well as sponsors sporting events, concerts, movies, and television series. This intensification of feelings enables entertainment content—and brand messages—to break through the "clutter" and become memorable for consumers: "We will use a diverse array of entertainment assets to break into people's hearts and minds. In that order. . . . We're moving to ideas that elicit emotion and create connections. And this speeds the convergence of Madison + Vine. Because the ideas which have always sat at the heart of the stories you've told and the content you've sold . . . whether movies or music or television . . . are no longer just intellectual property, they're emotional capital."

Kevin Roberts, the CEO Worldwide of Saatchi & Saatchi, argues that the future of consumer relations lies with

Product Placement and *The Apprentice*

Mark Burnett, the executive producer of *Survivor* and *The Apprentice* (2004), has been on the cutting-edge of experiments in brand integration. After finding networks highly resistant to his initial *Survivor* proposal, the producer agreed to help offset the anticipated costs of the production by preselling sponsorship, convincing companies such as Reebok to pay $4 million apiece for product placements during the series.[1] His second series, *The Restaurant* (2003), was fully funded by product placements from Mitsubishi, American Express, and Coors Brewing Company.[2] With *The Apprentice*, Burnett charged up to $25 million per company for a significant product placement, and in the process the series became a test site for a range of different approaches of linking brands and series content.[3]

How many different ways is *The Apprentice* involved in branding?

1. *The Brand as Protagonist*: Program host Donald Trump casts himself and his corporate empire as the series protagonists. In the course of the

[1] Ted Nadger, "The End of TV 101: Reality Programs, Formats, and the New Business of Television," in Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (eds.), *Reality Television: Remaking Television Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

[2] Wade Paulsen, "NBC's *The Restaurant* Funded Solely by Product Placement," *Reality TV World*, July 18, 2003, http://www.realitytvworld.com/index/articles/stor.php?s=1429.

[3] Michael McCarthy, "Also Starring (Your Product Name Here)," *U.S.A. Today*, August 12, 2004.

series, we visit his many different companies, meet his staff (as well as his fiancée), visit his apartment, and learn about his business philosophy. The contestants are vying for a chance to help run one of his projects, which is presented as if it were the greatest opportunity any young business person might aspire toward.

2. ***The Brand as Taskmaster*:** In the second season (Fall 2004), contestants were asked to design and market test toys for Toys 'R' Us and Mattel, to develop new ice cream flavors for Ciao Bella, to redesign the bottle for a new Pepsi product, to sell a new M&M candy bar on the streets, and to market a new Vanilla Mint toothpaste for Procter & Gamble. Procter & Gamble spokesman Bryan McCleary commented, "Having an entire episode dedicated to selling the benefits of this new product was a very appealing story line—the viewer actually ends up rooting for the brand to succeed."[4]
3. ***The Branding Process as Entertainment*:** On the September 23, 2004, episode, contestants demonstrated ways of linking brands and entertainment (circus acrobats and clowns, the New York Mets) to create buzz for the new Crest product. Other storylines centered on their efforts to produce spots that would promote recruitment by the New York Police Department or to peddle household goods on the Home Shopping Network.
4. ***The Brand as Helper*:** Frequently, the contestants consult with a range of smaller companies (such as the Alliance Talent Agency) who aid them in their tasks in return for exposure.

[4] "Sponsors Buy into Reality TV," Product Placement News, *ITVX*, December 6, 2004, http://

"lovemarks" that are more powerful than traditional "brands" because they command the "love" as well as the "respect" of consumers: "The emotions are a serious opportunity to get in touch with consumers. And best of all, emotion is an unlimited resource. It's always there—waiting to be tapped with new ideas, new inspirations, and new experiences."[25] Arguing that only a small number of customers make purchase decisions based purely on rational criteria, Roberts urges marketers to develop multisensory (and multimedia) experiences that create more vivid impressions and to tap the power of stories to shape consumer identifications. For example, Coca-Cola's corporate Web site (http://www2.coca-cola.com/heritage/stories/index.html) includes a section where consumers can share their own personal stories about their relationship with the product, stories that get organized around themes such as "romance," "reminders of family," "childhood memories," "an affordable luxury," "times with friends," and a "memory of home." These themes merge core emotional relationships with core promotional themes, helping people not simply to integrate Coca-Cola into their memories of their lives, but also to frame those memories in terms of the marketing pitch.

American Idol wants its fans to feel the love or, more specifically, the "lovemarks." Audience participation is a way of getting *American Idol* viewers more deeply invested, shoring up their loyalty to the franchise and its sponsors. This investment begins with the turnout of millions of would-be contestants at auditions held in stadiums and convention hotels around the country. Many more people watch the series than try out; many more try out than make the air; many more make the air than become finalists. But, at every step along the way, the viewers are invited to imagine that "it could be me or someone I know." From there, the weekly votes increase the viewer's engagement, building a strong allegiance to the individual performers. By the time the records are released, many of the core consumers have already endorsed the performers, and fan clubs are already involved with grassroots marketing. For example, fans of Clay Aiken, the runnerup on Season Two, turned their disappointment into a campaign to ensure that his album, *Measure of a Man* (2003), outsold first-place finisher Ruben Studdard's *Soulful* (2003). Clay's album sold more than 200,000 more copies than Studdard's in its opening week on the charts—though one suspects that the record executives would have been happy whichever way the sales contest went.[26] Coca-Cola, in turn, brands key series elements: contestants wait in the "red room" before going on stage; judges sip from Coca-Cola cups; highlights get featured on the official program Web site surrounded by a Coca-Cola logo; soft drink promotions reward tickets to the finales; Coca-Cola sends *Idol* performers to NASCAR races and other sporting events that it sponsors; and Coca-Cola's sponsorship figures prominently at the *American Idol* finalist's national concert tour.[27]

5. ***The Brand as Prize*:** In many cases, Trump rewards contestants with access to himself and his "things" or to luxury meals and services (such as a caviar feast at Petrossian's or jewelry from Graff's).
6. ***The Brand as Tie-in*:** Following an episode in which the contestants designed ice cream, viewers at home were able to order samples of the flavors online to serve at their next *Apprentice* theme party. Similarly, although they had not planned on producing a tie-in with the series, Mattel was so excited with the results of their episode that they eventually marketed the Mighty Morpher toy car that was designed by the contestants. J. C. Penney distributed a catalog of Levi jeans that was designed by one of the teams during another challenge.
7. ***The Brand as Community*:** Through a tie-in between *The Apprentice* and Friendster, fans asserted their affiliation with specific contestants, and the producers collected real-time data about audience response.
8. ***The Brand as Event*:** Trump launched a sweepstakes competition with Yahoo! Hot Jobs, whose 25k award is designed to encourage new initiatives. A sign for the service was mounted on top of the cab that took the dejected contestants away, and in one comic interstitial, the colorful Raj appeared as a taxi driver.
9. ***The Contestants as Brand*:** The female contestants were showcased modeling lingerie as "The Women of *The Apprentice*" in *Maxim* magazine.
10. ***The Brand as Judges*:** As the second season neared its finale, Trump allowed a range of executives from other companies, including Unilever

the New England Patriots, to help him to winnow down the finalists.

These examples scarcely exhaust the roles brands play in the series (and don't include the various ways NBC is using the series to revise its own brand identity). The temptation among media-savvy people is to dismiss *The Apprentice* as nothing but one big product placement, but this would not adequately explain its popularity. *The Apprentice* is popular because it's a well-made show, and the brand tie-ins work because they are linked to its core emotional mechanics. We care about the brands because they become the focus of contests or because they shape our identifications with the characters. But, as a general rule, the reality shows that have gotten the highest ratings have been those that have had the most original and compelling formats.

Heyer spoke of a shift "away from broadcast TV as the anchor medium" and toward "experience-based, access-driven marketing" as the ideal means of reaching the emerging generation of consumers. Cokemusic.com further aligns the soft drink company with people's enjoyment of popular music, allowing for a range of different participatory and interactive options. Members can pay for downloads of popular songs or redeem coupons that allow them to download songs for free. Members can create their own music mixes, share them with one another, and receive ratings from other site visitors. Ratings points reward "decibels" that can be redeemed to purchase virtual furnishing for their "pads," allowing further customization and a deeper sense of belonging in the world of Coca-Cola. "Performers" develop reputations and followings, which provide emotional incentives for them to spend even more time working on their "mixes." More casual site visitors can participate in a range of quizzes, games, and contests. Cokemusic.com has become the third most popular Web site among teens, registering more than 6 million users who spend an average of forty minutes per visit. As Carol Kruse, the director of interactive marketing for the company, explains, "They're having fun, they're learning about music, they're building a sense of community . . . and it's all in a very safe and friendly Coke environment."[28]

Brand loyalty is the holy grail of affective economics because of what economists call the 80/20 rule: for most consumer products, 80 percent of purchases are made by 20 percent of their consumer base. Maintaining the allegiance of that 20 percent stabilizes the market and allows companies to adopt an array of other approaches to court those who would make the other 20 percent of purchases.[29] Corporations are turning toward active consumers because they must do so if they are going to survive; some have learned that such consumers can be allies,

but many still fear and distrust them, seeking ways to harness this emerging power toward their own ends.

Something of this ambivalence can be seen in Roberts's description of what he calls "inspirational consumers" or others call "brand advocates": "They are the ones who promote and advocate for the brand. The ones . . . who suggest improvements and refinements, who create websites and spread the word. They are also the people who act as moral guardians for the brands they love. They make sure the wrongs are righted and hold the brand fast to its stated principles."[30] Roberts acknowledges that these "inspirational consumers," individually and collectively, place demands on corporations, citing the example of the outcry when Coca-Cola sought to replace its classic formula with "New Coke" and was forced within two months to back off from that decision. Roberts argues that companies need to listen closely when these inspirational consumers speak—especially when they criticize a company decision. A company that loses faith with its "inspirational consumers," he argues, will soon lose its core market: "When a consumer loves you enough to take action, any action, it is time to take notice. Immediately."[31] Roberts praises companies that actively court such fans through, to continue the Coca-Cola example, hosting events and conventions where their collectibles are appraised and showcased. The first fan club for Coca-Cola formed in 1974, a grassroots effort by a small group of enthusiasts. Today, fan clubs operate in twenty-eight different countries around the world and host a global network of local and national conventions that the company uses to bring together and address its most dedicated consumers.

Roberts's advice about courting "inspirational consumers" is echoed across a range of other business best-sellers, such as Marc Gobé's *Emotional Branding: The New Paradigm for Connecting Brands to People* (2001), Matthew W. Ragas's *The Power of Cult Branding: How 9 Magnetic Brands Turned Customers into Loyal Followers (and Yours Can, Too)* (2002), and John Hagel III and Arthur G. Armstrong's *Net.Gain: Expanding Markets through Virtual Communities* (1997).[32] They point toward a world where the most valued consumer may be the one who is most passionate, dedicated, and actively engaged. Far from marginal, fans are the central players in a courtship dance between consumers and marketers. As one noted industry guide explains, "Marketing in an interactive world is a collaborative process with the marketer helping the consumer to

buy and the consumer helping the marketer to sell."[33] This search for "inspirational consumers" is starting to impact the way television audiences are appraised and the ways advertisers think about selling products.

Zappers, Casuals, and Loyals

Industry insiders often deploy the distinction among zappers, casuals, and loyals: this distinction manages to blur together how, why, and what consumers watch. Zappers are people who constantly flit across the dial—watching snippets of shows rather than sitting down for a prolonged engagement. Loyals actually watch fewer hours of television each week than the general population: they cherry pick those shows that best satisfy their interests; they give themselves over fully to them; they tape them and may watch them more than one time; they spend more of their social time talking about them; and they are more likely to pursue content across media channels. Loyals watch series; zappers watch television. Loyals form long-term commitments; zappers are like the folks at cocktail parties who are always looking over their shoulders to see if someone more interesting has just entered the room. Casuals fall somewhere in between; they watch a particular series when they think of it or have nothing better to do. They generally watch it from start to finish but are more apt to wander away if it starts to bore them. They may be more likely to conduct conversations or do other household activities over the show rather than give it their full attention.

No given viewer is exclusively a loyal, a casual, or a zapper; most watch television in different ways on different occasions. The most discriminating viewer will zap around the dial in a hotel room or at the end of a hard day. And sometimes zappers get hooked into a series and watch it every week. Nobody knows for sure yet whether the new media environment has produced more zappers, casuals, or loyals. For one thing, A. C. Nielsen's continued focus on entire program blocks rather than more microscopic units of time means that they have no real way of measuring zapping or, indeed, the fluctuating loyalties of more casual viewers.

Throughout much of the 1990s, industry analysts overstressed the significance of the zappers. For example, Phillip Swann asserts in his book *TV.Com: How Television Is Shaping Our Future*, "Few viewers today can sit through an entire program without picking up the remote and checking out another channel. . . . Today's viewer needs constant gratification: if she's not entertained or intrigued for any stretch of time, she will flip the dial."[34] Swann thinks interactive television should and will be designed for zappers. In Swann's future, variety and magazine shows will almost entirely displace dramas, and the few remaining series will be shrunk to thirty minutes or less. According to Swann, "[There will be] fewer occasions where people sit down and watch a show from beginning to end without interruptions. People will start watching TV shows the way they read books: a little at a time. . . . The concept of 'appointment television'—arranging to be home at a precise time to watch a particular program—will soon be a thing of the past."[35] Refusing to bow out just yet, the networks want to hold on to appointment viewing by constructing new forms of programming that demand and reward immediate attention, and they want to build up viewer loyalty by intensifying the affective appeal of their programs.

Industry research now suggests that

America's Army

In 1997, the National Research Council, acting as an adviser to the U.S. Defense Department, issued its own vision for convergence culture, which they called "Modeling and Simulation: Linking Entertainment and Defense." Recognizing that the consumer electronic entertainment sector was outpacing defense research in developing simulation and artificial intelligence techniques, the defense department sought ways to collaborate with industry to develop games that could help them to recruit and train a next-generation fighting force: "The DOD is interested in exercises; the games industry is interested in networked games that would allow hundreds or thousands of players to participate."[1] Some have seen this report as representing a major first step toward the establishment of what is being called the military/entertainment complex. Yet, the report acknowledged many of the same challenges to collaboration we have identified elsewhere in convergence culture: "The entertainment industry and DOD are two different cultures, with different languages, different business models, and separate communities of constituents. . . . Success will rely on sustained commitment from both sides—and from a shared belief that the benefits of collaboration are worth the costs."[2]

Responding to this report, people in the U.S. military began to explore how games could be used to speak to younger Americans who were alienated or bored by traditional approaches to recruitment. The military also wanted to tap the communities that emerged around games as a means of rebuilding the social connections between military and civilians at a time when most military volunteers came from a relatively narrow sector of the population. Colonel E. Casey Wardynski, the man who originated the *America's Army* project, explains:

> Whereas in the past a young American could gain insights into military service by listening to the recollections or the

[1] Unless otherwise noted, my discussion of *America's Army* draws upon Zhan Li, "The Potential of America's Army: The Video Game as Civilian-Military Public Sphere," Master's thesis, Comparative Media Studies, MIT, Summer 2003.

[2] All quotes in this paragraph are taken from National Research Council, Committee on Modeling and Simulation, "Modeling and Simulation: Linking Entertainment and Defense," Washington, D.C.,

p. 175-186

5

Why Heather Can Write

Media Literacy and the Harry Potter *Wars*

So far, we have seen that corporate media increasingly recognizes the value, and the threat, posed by fan participation. Media producers and advertisers now speak about "emotional capital" or "lovemarks" to refer to the importance of audience investment and participation in media content. Storytellers now think about storytelling in terms of creating openings for consumer participation. At the same time, consumers are using new media technologies to engage with old media content, seeing the Internet as a vehicle for collective problem solving, public deliberation, and grassroots creativity. Indeed, we have suggested that it is the interplay—and tension—between the top-down force of corporate convergence and the bottom-up force of grassroots convergence that is driving many of the changes we are observing in the media landscape.

On all sides and at every level, the term *participation* has emerged as a governing concept, albeit one surrounded by conflicting expectations. Corporations imagine participation as something they can start and stop, channel and reroute, commodify and market. The prohibitionists are trying to shut down unauthorized participation; the collaborationists are trying to win grassroots creators over to their side. Consumers, on the other side, are asserting a right to participate in the culture, on their own terms, when and where they wish. This empowered consumer faces a series of struggles to preserve and broaden this perceived right to participate.

All of these tensions surfaced very visibly through two sets of conflicts surrounding J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, conflicts that fans collectively refer to as "the Potter wars." On the one hand, there was the struggle of teachers, librarians, book publishers, and civil liberty groups to stand up against efforts by the religious right to have the *Harry Potter* books removed from school libraries and banned from

local bookstores. On the other, there were the efforts of Warner Bros. to rein in fan appropriations of the *Harry Potter* books on the grounds that they infringed on the studio's intellectual property. Both efforts threatened the right of children to participate within the imaginative world of *Harry Potter*—one posing a challenge to their right to read, the other a challenge to their right to write. From a purely legal standpoint, the first constitutes a form of censorship, the other a legitimate exercise of property rights. From the perspective of the consumer, on the other hand, the two start to blur since both place restrictions on our ability to fully engage with a fantasy that has taken on a central place in our culture.

The closer we look at these two conflicts, the more complex they seem. Contradictions, confusions, and multiple perspectives should be anticipated at a moment of transition when one media paradigm is dying and another is being born. None of us really knows how to live in this era of media convergence, collective intelligence, and participatory culture. These changes are producing anxieties and uncertainties, even panic, as people imagine a world without gatekeepers and live with the reality of expanding corporate media power. Our responses to these changes cannot be easily mapped in traditional ideological terms: there is not a unified right-wing or left-wing response to convergence culture. Within Christianity, there are some groups that embrace the potentials of the new participatory culture and others terrified by them. Within companies, as we have seen, there are sudden lurches between prohibitionist and collaborationist responses. Among media reformers, some forms of participation are valued more than others. Fans disagree among themselves on how much control J. K. Rowling or Warner Bros. should have over what consumers do with *Harry Potter*. It isn't as if any of us knows all of the answers yet.

All of the above suggests that the Potter wars are at heart a struggle over what rights we have to read and write about core cultural myths —that is, a struggle over literacy. Here, literacy is understood to include not simply what we can do with printed matter but also what we can do with media. Just as we would not traditionally assume that someone is literate if they can read but not write, we should not assume that someone possesses media literacy if they can consume but not express themselves. Historically, constraints on literacy come from attempts to control different segments of the population—some societies have embraced universal literacy, others have restricted literacy to

specific social classes or along racial and gender lines. We may also see the current struggle over literacy as having the effect of determining who has the right to participate in our culture and on what terms. *Harry Potter* is a particularly rich focal point for studying our current constraints on literacy because the book itself deals so explicitly with issues of education (often lending its voice to children's rights over institutional constraints) and because the book has been so highly praised for inciting young people to develop their literacy skills.

Yet, the books have also been the focus of various attempts to constrain what kids read and write. My focus is on the *Harry Potter* wars as a struggle over competing notions of media literacy and how it should be taught: the informal pedagogy that emerged within the *Harry Potter* fan community, the attempts to tap kids' interests in the books in classrooms and libraries, the efforts of corporate media to teach us a lesson about the responsible treatment of their intellectual property, the anxieties about the secularization of education expressed by cultural conservatives, and the very different conception of pedagogy shared by Christian supporters of the *Harry Potter* novels within the "discernment movement." All sides want to claim a share in how we educate the young, since shaping childhood is often seen as a way of shaping the future direction of our culture.[1] By looking more closely at these various bids on education, we may map some of the conflicting expectations shaping con-

Fan Fiction in the Era of Web 2.0

You say "User-Generated Content."
We say "Fan Culture."
Let's call the whole thing off!

As this book has suggested, the media industry and its consumers alike now operate as if we were moving towards a more participatory culture, but they have not yet agreed upon the terms of our participation. Even companies that adopt a collaborationist logic have a lot to learn about creating and maintaining a meaningful and reciprocal relationship with their consumers.

Consider, for example, FanLib.com, a startup company founded by such established media players as *Titanic* producer Jon Landau, entertainment lawyer Jon Moonves, and former Yahoo CMO Anil Singh.[1] FanLib began by hosting officially sponsored fan fiction competitions around *The L Word* and *The Ghost Whisperer*. Soon, the company sought to become a general interest portal for all fan fiction, actively soliciting material from leading fan writers and ignoring rights holders. Chris Williams, the company's CEO, explained the company's business model: "The value proposition for fans is a free venue where they can pursue their passion by creating, showcasing, reading, reviewing, sharing, archiving, discovering stories, and by participating in fun events in a community with similar interests. . . . The value proposition for media companies and publishers is to connect, engage, and entertain fans of their media properties in a new online storytelling environment."[2]

[1] For more on the FanLib controversy, see Henry Jenkins, "Transforming Fan Culture into User-Generated Content: The Case of FanLib," Confessions of an Aca-Fan, May 22, 2007.

[2] Henry Jenkins, "Chris Williams Responds to Our Questions about FanLib," Confessions of an Aca-Fan

Fans found reason to suspect the credibility of the company's commitment to defend the rights of fan fiction writers when fans stumbled onto an old business prospectus still posted on line which had been used to sell the initial fan fiction contests. Here, FanLib made a different set of promises to the commercial companies which controlled the rights over these characters: "Managed & Moderated to the Max."

- All the FanLib action takes place in a highly customized environment that you control.
- As with a coloring book, players must stay within the lines.
- Restrictive player's terms-of-service protects your rights and property.
- Moderated "scene missions" keep the story under your control.
- Full monitoring & management of submissions & Players.
- Automatic "profanity filter."
- Completed work is just 1st draft to be polished by the pros.

Each bullet signaled the death of the free and open space fans have carved out for their fiction writing activities in practice, if not in law, over the previous several decades.

FanLib had done its homework by the standards of the venture capitalist world: they had identified a potential market; they had developed a business plan; they had even identified potential contributors to the site; they had developed a board of directors. But they hadn't listened to, talked with, or respected the existing grassroots community that had grown up around the production and distribution of fan fiction. The company, for example, targeted the predominantly female fan writing community with an advertising campaign depicting amateur fan fiction as a 90-pound weakling and commercially hosted fan fiction as buff and muscular.

vergence culture. In the process, I will consider what happens as the concept of participatory culture runs up against two of the most powerful forces shaping children's lives: education and religion.

Consider this a story of participation and its discontents.

Hogwarts and All

When she was thirteen, Heather Lawver read a book that she says changed her life: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.*[2] Inspired by reports that J. K. Rowling's novel was getting kids to read, she wanted to do her part to promote literacy. Less than a year later, she launched *The Daily Prophet* (http://www.dprophet.com), a Web-based "school newspaper" for the fictional Hogwarts. Today, the publication has a staff of 102 children from all over the world.

Lawver has been its managing editor, hiring columnists who covered their own "beats" on a weekly basis—everything from the latest quidditch matches to muggle cuisine. Heather personally edited each story, getting it ready for publication. She encourages her staff to closely compare their original submissions with the edited versions and consults with them on issues of style and grammar as needed. Heather initially paid for the site through her allowances until someone suggested opening a post office box where participants could send their contributions; she has since run it on a small budget, but at least she can draw on the allowances of her friends and contributors to keep it afloat during hard times.

Lawver, by the way, was home schooled and hadn't set foot in a classroom since first grade. Her family had been horrified by what they saw as racism and anti-intellectualism, which they encountered when she entered first grade in a rural Mississippi school district. She explained, "It was hard to combat prejudices when you are facing it every day. They just pulled me and one of my brothers out of school. And we never wanted to go back."

A girl who hadn't been in school since first grade was leading a worldwide staff of student writers with no adult supervision to publish a school newspaper for a school that existed only in their imaginations.

From the start, Lawver framed her project with explicit pedagogical goals that she used to help parents understand their children's participation. In an open letter to parents of her contributors, Lawver describes the site's goals:

> *The Daily Prophet* is an organization dedicated to bringing the world of literature to life. . . . By creating an online "newspaper" with articles that lead the readers to believe this fanciful world of *Harry Potter* to be real, this opens the mind to exploring books, diving into the characters, and analyzing great literature. By developing the mental ability to analyze the written word at a young age, children will find

the total absence of women on the company's board of directors and the absence of any kind of fan advisory committee which might represent the interests of those who had been writing and publishing fan fiction for more than three decades.

The FanLib controversy should be understood against the backdrop of what industry insiders have been calling "web 2.0," a term popularized by business guru Tim O'Reilly to describe the revitalization of the digital economy fueled by companies such as photo-sharing site Flickr, social networking sites MySpace and Facebook, and video uploading sites such as YouTube and Veoh.[3] These web 2.0 enterprises built their business plans on the back of user-generated content. O'Reilly described such companies as constructing "an architecture of participation," which made them more responsive to consumers and enabled them to "harness collective intelligence," drawing much of their value from recirculating content generated by other users. Throughout 2005 and 2006, news magazines trumpeted these companies, with *Business Week* proclaiming "the Power of Us," *Newsweek* talking about "Putting the 'We' in the Web," and *Time* naming "You" (as in YouTube) its person of the year.[4]

Yet the controversy over FanLib was one of many signs that the informal and implicit social contract behind this talk of web 2.0 was starting to fray by 2007. Privacy advocates questioned how

[3] Tim O'Reilly, "What Is Web 2.0?: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software," http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html

[4] "The Power of Us," *Business Week*, June 20 2006; "Putting the 'We' in the Web," *Newsweek*, April 3, 2006; Lev Grossman, "*Time*'s Person of the Year: You,"

much personal data was being tapped by these commercial companies; social critics argued that users were often trapped into long-term relationships with these companies as a result of the efforts consumers invested in uploading their data and drawing their friends into these social networks. Some were calling for greater interoperability, which would allow people to easily transfer their data from one site to another. Tiziana Terranova has offered a cogent critique of web 2.0 as a form of "free labor": "Free labor is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited."[5] A joke circulating on the Internet defined web 2.0: "You make all the content. They keep all the revenue."

FanLib embraced this web 2.0 model of "user-generated content," forgetting that it was interacting with an existing subcultural community rather than generating one from scratch around innovative tools or services. The industry tends to see these users in isolation—as individuals who want to express themselves, rather than as part of preexisting communities with their own norms and institutionalized practices. FanLib talked about fan fiction as a traditional practice, but its executives were more comfortable courting fans as free agents rather than dealing with them as members of a larger community.

For many fans, the noncommercial nature of fan culture is one of its most important characteristics. These stories are a labor of love; they operate in a gift economy and are given freely to other fans who share their passion for these

[5] Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy." *Electronic Book Review. 2003*, http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/

> a love for reading unlike any other. By creating this faux world we are learning, creating, and enjoying ourselves in a friendly utopian society.[3]

Lawver is so good at mimicking teacherly language that one forgets that she has not yet reached adulthood. For example, she provides reassurances that the site will protect children's actual identities and that she will screen posts to ensure that none contain content inappropriate for younger participants.[4] Lawver was anxious to see her work recognized by teachers, librarians, and her fellow home schoolers. She developed detailed plans for how teachers can use her template to create localized version of a Hogwarts school newspaper as class projects. A number of teachers have taken up her offer.

Whether encountered inside or outside formal education, Lawver's project enabled kids to immerse themselves into the imaginary world of Hogwarts and to feel a very real sense of connection to an actual community of children around the world who were working together to produce *The Daily Prophet*. The school they were inventing together (building on the foundations of J. K. Rowling's novel) could not have been more different from the one she had escaped in Mississippi. Here, people of many different ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds (some real, some imagined) formed a community where individual differences were accepted and where learning was celebrated.

The point of entry into this imaginary school was the construction of a fictional identity, and subsequently these personas get woven into a series of "news stories" reporting on events at Hogwarts. For many kids, the profile is all they would write—having a self within the fiction was enough to satisfy the needs that brought them to the site. For others, it was the first step toward constructing a more elaborate fantasy about their life at Hogwarts. In their profiles, kids often combined mundane details of their everyday experiences with fantastical stories about their place within J. K. Rowling's world:

> I recently transferred from Madame McKay's Academy of Magic in America to come to Hogwarts. Lived in southern California for most of my life, and my mother never told my father that she was a witch until my fifth birthday (he left shortly afterwards).
>
> Orphaned at 5 when her parents died of cancer, this pure blood witch was sent to live with a family of wizards associated with the Ministry of Magic.

The image of the special child being raised in a mundane (in this case, muggle) family and discovering their identities as they enter school age is a classic theme of fantasy novels and fairy tales, yet here there are often references to divorce or cancer, real-world difficulties so many kids face. From the profiles themselves, we can't be sure whether

characters. Being free of the commercial constraints that surround the source texts, they gain new freedom to explore themes or experiment with structures and styles that could not be part of the "mainstream" versions of these worlds.[6] Others within fandom, however, were arguing that it was the failure of fans to capitalize on their own cultural production which left them vulnerable to outside commercial interests. The group's resistance to profit making, they argued, reflected longer gender divides which devalued women's creative contributions as "crafts."[7]

Whether making money off of fan fiction was right or wrong, few long-term fans wanted to see a startup moving into the space and profiting from their culture. Writing at the peak of the FanLib controversy, one fan explained, "This is the reason I have been involved recently in arguments about whether our community should accept the monetization of fan fiction. Because I think it's coming whether we accept it or not, and I'd rather it was fan-creators getting the benefit of the $$$, not some cutthroat entrepreneur who doesn't care about our community except as a market niche."[8]

Far from being helpless, angry fans quickly and effectively rallied in opposition to FanLib, using their own channels of communication—especially LiveJournal—to inflict damage on the brand. They pooled their knowledge and

[6] Catherine Tossenberger, *Potterotics: Harry Potter Fanfiction on the Internet*, Dissertation, University of Florida 2007. Tossenberger derives her concept in part from a Live Journal post by Seperis, November 23, 2003, http://seperis.livejournal.com/108109.html.

[7] Abigail Derecho, *Illegitimate Media: Race, Gender, and Censorship in Digital Remix*, Dissertation, Comparative Literary Studies, Northwestern University, 2008.

[8] almostnever, Live Journal, May 14, 2007, http://

deconstructed terms of service and promotional material, raising questions about the ways that web 2.0 companies related to their participants.

As the debate unfolded, a number of long-standing leaders in the fan community joined forces to form the Organization for Transformative Works as a means of protecting their traditional cultural practices and of bringing them into the twenty-first century:

> We envision a future in which all fannish works are recognized as legal and transformative, and accepted as legitimate creative activity. We are proactive and innovative in protecting and defending our work from commercial exploitation and legal challenge. We preserve our fannish economy, values, and way of life by protecting and nurturing our fellow fans, our work, our commentary, our history, and our identity, while providing the broadest possible access to fannish activity for all fans. We value our infinite diversity in infinite combinations. We value the unhindered cross-pollination and exchange of fannish ideas and cultures, while seeking to avoid the homogenization or centralization of fandom.[9]

Adopting models from the open source movement, fan coders and programmers are creating a new infrastructure for sharing fan fiction, fan vids, and other forms of fan cultural production; fans with legal background are constructing arguments they hope might deflect legal challenge; fans with business backgrounds are acquiring resources needed to sustain the effort; and fans with academic backgrounds are creating an online journal contextualizing the community's cultural practices and traditions.

[9] "Our Vision," Organization for Transformative Works, http://transformativeworks.org/.

these are problems they have confronted personally or are anxious possibilities they are exploring through their fantasies. Heather has suggested that many kids come to *The Daily Prophet* because their schools and families have failed them in some way; they use the new school community to work through their feelings about some traumatic event or to compensate for their estrangement from kids in their neighborhoods. Some children are drawn toward some of the fantasy races—elves, goblins, giants, and the like—while other kids have trouble imagining themselves to be anything other than muggle-born, even in their fantasy play. Children use stories to escape from or reaffirm aspects of their real lives.[5]

Rowling's richly detailed world allows many points of entry. Some kids imagine themselves as related to the characters—the primary ones like Harry Potter or Snape, of course, but also minor background figures—the inventors of the quidditch brooms, the authors of the textbooks, the heads of referenced agencies, classmates of Harry's mother and father, any affiliation that allows them to claim a special place for themselves in the story. In her book *Writing Superheroes* (1997), Anne Haas Dyson uses the metaphor of a "ticket to play" to describe how the roles provided by children's media properties get deployed by children in a classroom space to police who is allowed to participate and what roles they can assume.[6] Some children fit comfortably within the available roles;

others feel excluded and have to work harder to insert themselves into the fantasy. Dyson's focus has to do with divisions of gender and race, primarily, but given the global nature of *The Daily Prophet* community, nationality also was potentially at stake. Rowling's acknowledgment in subsequent books that Hogwarts interacted with schools around the world gave students from many countries a "ticket" into the fantasy: "Sirius was born in India to Ariel and Derek Koshen. Derek was working as a Ministry of Magic ambassador to the Indian Ministry. Sirius was raised in Bombay, and speaks Hindi fluently. While he was in Bombay he saved a stranded Hippogriff from becoming a jacket, cementing his long-lasting love of magical creatures. He at-tended Gahdal School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in Thailand." Here, it helps that the community is working hard to be inclusive and accepts fantasies that may not comfortably match the world described within the novels.

Despite their effectiveness at developing an alternative model for their community's future, fan protestors did not destroy FanLib's profitability. By late 2007, the company had attracted more than 10,000 contributors. Some of these contributors were "newbies" drawn into fandom by the company's promotional efforts, and others were estranged from the established fan community. Many understood fan fiction as an individualized rather than community based activity. Trying to build a "community" for fan fiction, FanLib had attracted many who had little investment in affiliating with other fans.[10]

[10] Xiaochang Li, "Fan, Inc.: Another Look at FanLib.com," Convergence Culture Consortium Newsletter, December 14, 2007.

One striking consequence of the value placed on education in the *Harry Potter* books is that almost all of the participants at *The Daily Prophet* imagine themselves to be gifted students. Kids who read recreationally are still a subset of the total school population, so it is very likely that many of these kids are teacher's pets in real life. Hermione represented a particularly potent role model for the studiously minded young girls who were key contributors to *The Daily Prophet*. Some feminist critics argue that she falls into traditional feminine stereotypes of dependency and nurturance.[7] This may be true, but this character provides some point of identification for female readers within a book otherwise so focused on young boys. Here's how one young writer framed her relationship to the character:

> My name is Mandi Granger. I am 12 yrs old. I am also muggle born. Yes, I am related to Hermione Granger. I am Hermione's cousin. I am attending Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. This is my third year at Hogwarts. I am doing this article between all my studies. I guess I pick

> up my study habits from my cousin. I am in the Gryffindor house just like my cousin. I do know Harry Potter personally by my cousin. My cousin took him to my house before I went to Hogwarts. We mostly talk about Hogwarts and the Weasley's children.

Through children's fantasy play, Hermione takes on a much more active and central role than Rowling provided her. As Ellen Seiter notes in regard to girl-targeted series such as *Strawberry Shortcake* (1981), feminist parents sometimes sell their daughters short by underestimating their ability to extend beyond what is represented on the screen and by stigmatizing the already limited range of media content available to them.[8] Female readers are certainly free to identify across gender with a range of other characters—and one can see the claims of special family ties as one way of marking those identifications. Yet, at an age when gender roles are reinforced on all sides, transgressing gender roles through the fantasy may be harder than reconstructing the characters as vehicles for your own empowerment fantasies.

In some cases, the back stories for these characters are quite elaborate with detailed accounts of their wands, the animal familiars, their magical abilities, their favorite classes, their future plans, and the like. These fictional personas can contain the seeds of larger narratives, suggesting how the construction of an identity may fuel subsequent fan fiction:

> I'm the only sister of Harry Potter, and I am going to play for the Gryffindor quidditch team this year as a chaser. My best friend is Cho Chang, and I am dating Draco Malfoy (although Harry's not happy about that). One of my other good friends is Riley Ravenclaw, a co-writer. I have a few pets, a winged Thestral named Bostrio, a unicorn foal named Golden, and a snowy owl (like Hedwig) named Cassiddia. I was able to escape the Lord Voldemort attack on my family for the reason that I was holidaying with my Aunt Zeldy in Ireland at the time, though I mourn the loss of my mum and dad. I was mad about the awful things Ms. Skeeter wrote about my little brother, and I have sent her her own little package of undiluted bubotuber pus. HA!

As *The Daily Prophet* reporters develop their reports about life at Hogwarts, they draw each other's personas into their stories, trying to preserve what each child sees as its special place within this world. The result is a jointly produced fantasy—somewhere between a role-playing game and fan fiction. The intertwining of fantasies becomes a key element of bonding for these kids, who come to care about one another through interacting with these fictional personas.

What skills do children need to become full participants in convergence culture? Across this book, we have identified a number—the ability to pool knowledge with others in a collaborative enterprise (as in *Survivor* spoiling), the ability to share and compare value systems by evaluating ethical dramas (as occurs in the gossip surrounding reality television), the ability to make connections across scattered pieces of information (as occurs when we consume *The Matrix*, 1999, or *Pokémon*, 1998), the ability to express your interpretations and feelings toward popular fictions through your own folk culture (as occurs in *Star Wars* fan cinema), and the ability to circulate what you create via the Internet so that it can be shared with others (again as in fan cinema). The example of *The Daily Prophet* suggests yet another important cultural competency: role-playing both as a means of exploring a fictional realm and as a means of developing a richer understanding of yourself and the culture around you. These kids came to understand *Harry Potter* by occupying a space within Hogwarts; occupying such a space helped them to map more fully the rules of this fictional world and the roles that various characters played within it. Much as an actor builds up a character by combining things discovered through research with things learned through personal introspection, these kids were drawing on their own experiences to flesh out various aspects of Rowling's fiction. This is a kind of intellectual mastery that comes only through active participation. At the same time, role-playing was providing an inspiration for them to expand other kinds of literacy skills—those already valued within traditional education.

What's striking about this process, though, is that it takes place outside the classroom and beyond any direct adult control. Kids are teaching kids what they need to become full participants in convergence culture. More and more, educators are coming to value the learning that occurs in these informal and recreational spaces, especially as they confront the constraints imposed on learning via educational policies that seemingly value only what can be counted on a standardized test. If children are going to acquire the skills needed to be full participants in their culture, they may well learn these skills through involvement in activities such as editing the newspaper of an imaginary school or

teaching one another skills needed to do well in massively multiplayer games or any number of others things that teachers and parents currently regard as trivial pursuits.

Rewriting School

University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Education professor James Paul Gee calls such informal learning cultures "affinity spaces," asking why people learn more, participate more actively, engage more deeply with popular culture than they do with the contents of their textbooks.[9] As one sixteen-year-old *Harry Potter* fan told me, "It is one thing to be discussing the theme of a short story you've never heard of before and couldn't care less about. It is another to be discussing the theme of your friend's 50,000-word opus about Harry and Hermione that they've spent three months writing."[10] Affinity spaces offer powerful opportunities for learning, Gee argues, because they are sustained by common endeavors that bridge across differences in age, class, race, gender, and educational level, because people can participate in various ways according to their skills and interests, because they depend on peer-to-peer teaching with each participant constantly motivated to acquire new knowledge or refine his or her existing skills, and because they allow each participant to feel like an expert while tapping the expertise of others. More and more literacy experts are recognizing that enacting, reciting, and appropriating elements from preexisting stories is a valuable and organic part of the process by which children develop cultural literacy.[11]

A decade ago, published fan fiction came mostly from women in their twenties, thirties, and beyond. Today, these older writers have been joined by a generation of new contributors who found fan fiction surfing the Internet and decided to see what they could produce. *Harry Potter* in particular has encouraged many young people to write and share their first stories. Zsenya, the thirty-three-year-old Webmistress of The Sugar Quill, a leading site for Harry Potter fan fiction, offered this comment:

> In many cases, the adults really try to watch out for the younger members (theoretically, everybody who registers for our forums must be at least 13). They're a little bit like den mothers. I think it's really actually an amazing way to communicate. . . . The absence of face-to-face equalizes everyone a little bit, so it gives the younger members a chance to talk with adults without perhaps some of the intimidation they might normally feel in talking to adults. And in the other direction, I think it helps the adults remember what it was like to be at a certain age or in a certain place in life.[12]

These older fans often find themselves engaging more directly with people like Flourish. Flourish started reading *The X-Files* fan fiction when she was ten, wrote her first Harry Potter stories at twelve, and published her first online novel at fourteen.[13] She quickly became a mentor for other emerging fan writers, including many who were twice her age or more. Most people assumed she was probably a college student. Interacting online allowed her to keep her age to herself until she had become so central to the fandom that nobody cared that she was in middle school.

Educators like to talk about "scaffolding," the ways that a good pedagogical process works in a step-by-step fashion, encouraging kids to try out new skills that build on those they have already mastered, providing support for these new steps until the learner feels sufficient confidence to take them on their own. In the classroom, scaffolding is provided by the teacher. In a participatory culture, the entire community takes on some responsibility for helping newbies find their way. Many young authors began composing stories on their own as a spontaneous response to a popular culture. For these young writers, the next step was the discovery of fan fiction on the Internet, which provided alternative models for what it meant to be an author. At first, they might only read stories, but the fan community provides many incitements for readers to cross that last threshold into composing and submitting their own stories. And once a fan submits, the feedback he or she receives inspires further and improved writing.

What difference will it make, over time, if a growing percentage of young writers begin publishing and getting feedback on their work while they are still in high school? Will they develop their craft more quickly? Will they discover their voices at an earlier age? And what happens when these young writers compare notes, becoming critics, editors, and mentors? Will this help them develop a critical vocabulary for thinking about storytelling? Nobody is quite sure, but the potentials seem enormous. Authorship has an almost sacred aura in a world where there are limited opportunities to circulate your ideas to a larger