

Position Paper for Online and Offline Fan Communities

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Showtime Thinks, Therefore I Am: The Corporate Construction of The L-Word Fandom

My approach to this topic comes from the perspective of fandom in marginalized or minority communities, in this case the lesbian community. As I'm sure most will agree, the expansion of net access and literacy has provided new spaces for individuals who may have once felt isolated (by identity, fannish obsession, etc.). Where once fans of *Doctor Who* or *Star Trek* sought each other through conventions, zines, etc., fans need only logon to find a wealth of others reeling in ecstasy over their object of desire, be it a given television show, film, or band. Equally, those once relegated to finding members of the gay community through community outreach, bars, etc. (if even available in many small towns or rural areas) need only jump online to find a thriving queer community not only through sites like gay.com, but by flocking to fansites of shows such as *The L Word* or *Queer as Folk*. Along with this popularity, visibility, and access, comes the recognition by those who control the purse strings that a lucrative audience exists to be targeted or manipulated. As corporations take control of fansites through pimped-out network/studio/label-sponsored sites, an increased level of policing of fan art/fiction/chat/use of images or texts seems to work to limit types of fan activity. While not always strong-arming fans into submission—as George Lucas has been known to do—a more subtle and insidious control seems to be present. Increased visibility seems to be exchanged for complicity in a vision most conducive to the studios'/labels'/corporations' own economic or ideological goals.

An example of this corporate control I find strikingly relevant to this discussion can be seen through the evolution of the Showtime-sponsored *The L Word* website. In 2004 Showtime launched *The L Word*. Viewers simultaneously hailed the show as groundbreaking and critiqued the sudsy dyke drama for its narrow presentation of lesbian life: white, femme, and upwardly mobile. Jumping to her own defense, creator Ilene Chaiken described the show as a representation of her own specific Los Angeles lesbian community. Over the years, the folks at sho.com have pimped out the once understated fan-driven message board and unveiled, a site that reinforces Chaiken's, the show's, and to some extent dominant culture's safest image of lesbians with its own lesbian networking site Our Chart, blogs, podcasts, and Second Life simulated *L-Word* community.

Indicative of the corporate control or participation in a once free-flowing type of fan activity, the folks at Showtime took a site once more focused on individual fan postings on random topics and molded it to one that foregrounds characteristics seen desirable by dominant culture, the economic imperatives of the culture industry, and the very characteristics of the show critiqued by fans. They have made the site more complex to use (making it unruly for those perhaps most disenfranchised). Their blogs are authored by handpicked bloggers, almost all of whom represent East or West coast artists or academics. Butch, bi, and trans identities—as is the case in the show and often television at large—have been marginalized within the blogs. *The L-Word* in *Second Life* presents a similar issue. Far from the online text-driven lesbian bars of yesterday where the cyber-visitors created their own space, identities, and rituals, *Second Life* allows participants to choose from a limited number of options (and forces her to pay through the nose for it). Yes, fans can create their very own avatars to live, chat, dance, and, well, stand around in the lush surroundings of *The L Word*. Per the folks at Showtime, this experience only increases the opportunities of social networking. Along with youth, wealth, leisure, and education, the program seems to largely reinforce the norms of traditional femininity (much like the show). The female avatar defaults to a highly sexualized girly girl and few of the *L Word* citizens seem to stray far from that image: skinny, white, scantily clad, and glamorous. (My small-chested avatar was repeatedly approached suspiciously and asked if she was an interloping male.) Gals can purchase bustiers and sassy tattoos to flaunt their stuff to the local hotties. That's all well and good, but finding a pool table, cargo shorts, or butch haircut is hard to come by.

In short, while the site is totally sexy, the images and voices presented are a narrow depiction of a diverse community. Unsurprisingly, the network-sponsored site erases the butch, the bi, the trans, the working class, the Midwestern or rural, all in favor of creating a largely idealized and perhaps marketable (to both men and women) image of lesbianism. This corporate creation of the lesbian community basically creates a new version of the closet, one in which lesbianism is accepted, but acceptable articulations thereof are narrow.