TwitterTube
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Twansformative? The Future of Fandom on Twitter

In 2007, not long after its launch, Twitter made a splash on the social media scene by providing a deceptively simple interface that allowed for a variety of emergent users. Nothing more than a series of 140-character status updates with no provisions for organizing, filtering, grouping, verifying, or multimedia (to list some common features of competing platforms), Twitter captured imaginations with the idea of a real-time stream of bite-sized information and dovetailed with interest in a more lightweight and mobile internet (in contrast to bloated broadband destinations like Facebook). The site's developers adopted user-generated behaviors like @replies and #hashtags, and its open API represented a philosophy that invited innovation and extensibility rather than a "walled garden" approach. More recently, however, Twitter has chosen to prioritize new features that simplify and enhance the process of building and maintaining reputation, such as: Verified Accounts (June 2009); Lists (October 2009); the Retweet button (November 2009), which tried to trump established conventions; an ad platform based on Promoted Tweets (April 2010) and Promoted Trending Topics (July 2010); and an official Tweet Button for blogs and websites (August 2010).

The changes go hand in hand with increasing interest by companies and public figures in mobilizing this new online sensation to promote their visibility and brand, a trend that includes both mass media marketers and a more informal coterie of TV industry insiders. This gradual shift toward accommodating and soliciting corporations and advertisers seems to mirror the trajectory of many social media startups (from LiveJournal to YouTube) as they attempt to begin turning a profit. I'd like to explore its implications for fans and fandom on Twitter. As such, I'm largely setting aside the domain of celebrity from this roundtable's prompt and focusing on the interactions between industry and fan community. I'd like to propose that the mutually constitutive developments in Twitter's architecture, cultural zeitgeist, and commercial imperatives privilege affirmative over transformative modes of fandom.

Affirmative and transformative are terms for a widely recognized if coarse distinction between two dominant styles of fan participation (also identified by the telling but problematic fanboy vs. fangirl binary and by Anne Kustritz with the labels "as is" vs. creative fandom). According to fan obsession_inc, "affirmational fandom" is characterized by seeking "the author's purpose... rules... [and] details" in the "source material" whose producers are "always the last word on their own works" – thus "these are the *sanctioned* fans." "Transformational fandom," by contrast, values fanon over canon, appropriation over documentation, and multiple interpretations over hierarchical authority. The transformational practice of "fakers," or, unauthorized accounts that role-play public figures or fictional characters, has been notable among creative deployments of Twitter. While some of these personas are relatively free-standing caricatures, others congregate in interactive networks based on the ensemble of a TV show or movie.

In comparison to other common platforms utilized in play-by-post RPGs, Twitter is functionally anarchic, since the site's stripped-down interface lacks provisions for communicating, posting, and archiving in groups. Collaborators who want to organize out-of-character must use (or build) outside websites for this purpose. But in an overarching sense, Twitter's success is

founded on the capacity for simplicity to operate as a feature not a bug, and I experienced firsthand how this principle applies to interactive storytelling when I played a character from *Battlestar Galactica* on Twitter (largely at the end of season 4.0 and over the following hiatus). While I recruited some friends to portray a subset of characters (joining a handful that already existed), the anonymity of many of the participants was an opportunity for unpredictable and generative intersections between fans with very different contexts and perspectives – all rendered within our alternate universe. At the same time, I struggled with the challenges of tracking and documenting our engagements (my attempts at hacked solutions included favorites, screen-captures, and Yahoo!Pipes).

While Twitter can serve as a nexus for opening up (that is, transforming) television narrative (and even fandom itself), it is equally amenable to closing down (that is, affirming) mass media authorship. This crossroads seems to mirror tension within the corporate ethos of Twitter over whether it aims to be a grassroots or a commercial system. Whether the company can effectively carry out both functions remains to be seen. We might map Twitter accounts tied to TV shows onto a continuum from transformative to affirmative – in the case of *Battlestar Galactica*: my RP collaborators via LiveJournal > characters written anonymously from other corners of fandom > Big Name Fans like @proggrrl > influential fan sites like @galacticasitrep and @bsgfodder > creative professionals like @JaneEspenson and @bearmccreary > executive/marketing accounts like @Syfy (Craig Engler) and @Syfy_Caprica. While Twitter's creative possibilities will most likely remain viable (more on this in my roundtable presentation), my concern is that practical and ideological attention to authenticity on Twitter will ultimately lend greater legitimacy to fans who wish to consume an authoritative, sanctioned version of the show. Twitter brings affirmative fandom closer to its objects of adoration, and I suggest that we need be aware of how this unprecedented access is intertwined with the dynamics and objectives of the corporate media.

Presentation topic: Overtures by industry to endorse rather than embargo creative fan activity in the form of character role-playing (Mad Men and True Blood).

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more links

"The Path to 10 Billion Tweets": http://mashable.com/2010/03/18/twitter-infographic/
A Mashable infographic (March, 2010) with a timeline of features added in 2009.

Affirmational vs. Transformative fandom: http://fanlore.org/wiki/Affirmational_fandom

BSG twitter archive (6/13-8/3 08): http://pics.livejournal.com/projectjulie/gallery/0002twra
BSG twitter archive (8/3/08-2/17/09) [backwards]: http://twitter.com/cylonhybrid/favorites
my video commentary: http://youtube.com/watch?v=4XPUF3xe
my blog commentary: http://j-l-r.org/node/961

some TV shows on twitter: http://twitter.com/celebtweetlist/tv-shows/members
some TV writers on twitter: http://listorious.com/rmiriam/tv-writers

Fake Ronald Moore – @ronaldmoore

@JaneEspenson If he ever wants it, it's his for the asking. Just let me know.
6:17 AM Jun 11th via TTYtter

@JaneEspenson Fair enough. This account was fun for conversing with the fake BSG characters, but I ran out of ideas after that.
6:17 AM Jun 11th via TTYtter

@JaneEspenson Speaking of impostors, if Real Ronald Moore wants this Fake @ronaldmoore account, he can have it.
5:48 AM Jun 11th via Twitterrific in reply to JaneEspenson

For the record, giving your show a great climax, then fucking up the last ten minutes with "God did it"? Totally my idea first.
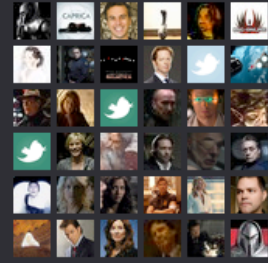6:03 PM May 24th via web

Jack: "What the heck do you call an act like that?" Locke & Ben "We call it 'The Aristocrats'." #LOSTlastlines
3:12 PM May 23rd via Twitterrific

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RSS feed of ronaldmoore's tweets