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Abstract: In early 2008, what started as a small report in an online conservative outlet on the Xbox 360 video game *Mass Effect* was picked up by a number of news outlets and blogs. In particular, Fox News' "Live Desk with Martha MacCallum" produced a segment on the game, claiming it was fully interactive digital pornography. One of the show's guests, pop psychologist Cooper Lawrence, argued that the game's sexual content was harmful, but did so with no firsthand knowledge of the game, incensing fans of the game. Those fans proceeded to respond in various ways, particularly on the Internet. The present research examined three distinct areas of these fan responses – forum discussions, YouTube videos, and the "review bombing" of Cooper Lawrence's books on Amazon.com. The various ways in which fans expressed their anger, displeasure, and opinions on the story and how the game was treated in the media present a chance not only to look into the mindset of these fans toward the various institutions involved in the Fox News flap, but also paint a picture of fan and gamer cultures in general.

Keywords: Fans, Fandom, Videogames, Mass Effect, Fox News, Internet, Online

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In 1986 William Shatner appeared on *Saturday Night Live* and took part in an infamous sketch mocking the fans who had made him a star—Trekkies. In a parody of a Star Trek convention, Shatner answered arcane questions about Trek lore, but grew increasingly frustrated and eventually exploded, telling the assembled geeks to "get a life!" While billed as a parody, Shatner was serious, yet fans had few avenues for response. Twenty years later, pop culture psychologist and radio host Cooper Lawrence appeared on Fox News's "Live Desk with Martha MacCallum" to discuss the Xbox 360 videogame *Mass Effect*, pronouncing it full of digital nudity and sex, and damaging to anyone who played it. Many fans were angered by the broadcast, and felt that the object of their affection was being mocked or denigrated by Fox News, and Cooper Lawrence specifically. Unlike the Shatner incident, however, this time fans had plenty of ways to respond and to express their outrage, dismay, and protest. And respond they did. Using a variety of Internet channels, such as online forums, YouTube, and even reviews on Amazon.com, fans voiced their opinions and made themselves heard. In this paper we use the *Mass Effect* controversy and fan reaction to it as a case study, to explore the following questions. How did videogame fans respond to the *Mass Effect* news story on Fox? How were fan responses shaped by the current media landscape? How did fans conceptualize 'the enemy' in their responses? Ultimately, what does this suggest about what it means to be a fan now?

Fandom and Gamers - Literature

Just as opportunities for fan responses have magnified, so too has theorization about fans increased exponentially in the past two decades. Early attention to fans often painted portraits of outsiders who read texts in oppositional ways and who created fan art and fiction marginal to larger pop culture. Yet with the mainstreaming of the Internet and media producers' more active conceptualization of media audiences, fandom is front and central in our understandings of how individuals understand media and their own investments with it. This paper scrutinizes how gamers made their own media texts (forum discussions, video responses, Amazon reviews) in response to the Fox News story. We draw from work

on fandom and participatory culture, but also add to it the perspectives of gamers, who are often constructed as fans, yet not as often explicitly included in fandom literature. In arguing for such an inclusion, Crawford & Rutter believe that "the reluctance to align digital gaming discussions with those of other media users originates in the assumption that it constitutes a significant and marked departure in media forms and practices that cannot necessarily be understood using the same theoretical tools or literature as 'older' media forms, such as television" (p. 274). Yet gamer practices are part of a wider array of fan practices, including not only gameplay, but also "a rich intertextual and transtextual web of other texts and practices" (p. 275). Fan theorists understand that fan engagement goes far beyond one particular text and instead forms "a *field of gravity*, which may or may not have an *urtext* in its epicenter, but which in any case corresponds with the fundamental meaning structure through which all these texts are read" (Sandvoss, p. 23, emphasis in original). Thus, gamers would fit quite well with our notions of what fans are and how they make meaning, particularly as fandom is constructed in active, participatory ways.

With *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins set the stage for the study of media fans and fandom (1992). Jenkins conceptualizes fandom based not on individual tastes or lifestyle choices but on involvement in a larger fan community. According to Jenkins, fan communities create and sustain themselves through the creation and circulation of fan-made texts, as "Fandom here becomes a *participatory culture* which transforms the experience of [fan] media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community" (p. 46).

Other scholars expanded the bounds of participatory culture to include other kinds of fans, and other kinds of fan-made texts, notably online forums and message boards (Baym, 2000; Lauters, 2001). Scholars have also applied the concept of participatory culture to the study of videogame players and player communities. Taylor's (2006a) work studying the construction of game culture in the MMOG *Everquest* is based on a rich ethnography of players, and depends for its analysis on a variety of fan-made texts. Newman (2005) also examined gamer forums, in search of both a greater understanding of gamers' online social lives, and how such communications give rise to new forms of play. One different form of play—construction and use of walkthroughs—was analyzed by Consalvo (2003) who explored

walkthroughs as unique forms of fan-authored narratives. Finally, Dutton (2007a) studied the participatory practice of quitting among *World of Warcraft* players, looking at the kinds of texts players create when they choose to quit playing the game. In his recent book *Fans, Bloggers, Gamers* (2006), Jenkins himself has turned to analyzing gamers and online communities through the lens of participatory culture.

Another emerging strand of fan culture literature focuses on the *labor* of fans that economically benefits the media industries. In relation to the games industry, Postigo (2007) analyzed various aspects of modifications ("mods") – fan-made texts that alter or add content to existing games – and modding communities, suggesting that mods have a huge economic impact in adding value to games. Hills (2002) would support and extend that assertion, arguing that cult TV fans, at least, "are being directly targeted as a niche market, rather than emerging unexpectedly through 'grassroots' movements of TV appreciation" (p. 36).

Finally, Hills points out that "fandom is not simply a 'thing' that can be picked over analytically. It is also always performative … it is an identity which is (dis-)claimed, and which performs cultural work" (p. xi). Hills also claims we need to see fandom not as part of a binary of fan=good/consumer=bad, but rather interrogate the contradictions involved in fandom, particularly as we seek to understand the movement of power between fans, media producers, and cultural products. In sum, we need to appreciate the role of fans in creating participatory cultures, yet also understand how fans are being constructed as valuable commodities in their own right—as niche markets.

Methods

Our research analyzes fan reactions to the Fox News story on *Mass Effect*. Since responses to the piece extend across digital media and take various forms, a case study – as a methodology that focuses on how a single event plays out across multiple sources of information (Creswell, 1998) – is a natural choice here. This study focuses on three areas: fan discussion in online blogs and forums, video responses uploaded to YouTube, and the "review bombing" of Cooper Lawrence on Amazon.com. These three sources provide not only a window into the mindset of many fans toward those involved in the Fox News

controversy, but also a chance to examine how fan responses paint a picture of the wider fan culture.

Though the controversy was discussed in many online spaces, we chose to focus on four forums: the gaming blog Kotaku, the forums for the popular gaming webcomic *Penny Arcade*, the forums at gaming information site Gamespy, and the official *Mass Effect* forums hosted by game developer BioWare. Kotaku was both commentator and active player in the case. The other three were chosen for the richness of available data; since data collection occurred months after the actual event, finding quality examples of forum communication was more difficult, as many forums delete posts after a certain time period. Despite that, the popularity of the forums chosen meant that the resulting communication still provided very rich data even months after the fact.

YouTube videos were sampled according to both purposeful and ‘snowball’ logic. Using the search terms "mass effect, fox news" and "mass effect, controversy" produced an initial list of videos ranging from reproductions of the event to individual commentary from users. In addition, YouTube's "Related Videos" feature was used to expand outward from the initial search to uncover videos on the same topic that might not respond to the original search terms. Videos were screened for suitability and added to a master list for a second viewing. In all, forty-two videos were analyzed accounting for videos removed from the initial list for being off-topic (approximately 4 videos) or having been removed by the user (1 video).

Most of the 400+ original "reviews" of Cooper Lawrence's *The Cult of Perfection*, on Amazon.com were removed prior to this analysis. When data collection began, 68 reviews remained on the site, and all of them were included, as well as comments left in response to individual reviews. We examined the 178 keyword "tags" associated with the book and the forums ("Customer Discussions") associated with Lawrence's book. Of the 55 listed discussions, the five threads with at least 25 replies were read through completely; the remaining smaller threads were read randomly to check for variability in replies.

All three content areas were analyzed according to McKee's (2003) model of textual analysis, focusing on how the content expressed a fan response, and also how the various types of response painted

a broader picture of fan culture.

Setting the Stage – A Timeline of Events

Mass Effect was released in November 2007 for the Xbox 360, quickly earning a 91 out of 100 on Metacritic.com, and selling over a million units. On January 11, 2008 the conservative Cybercast News Service published "Sex in video game makes waves in industry" by Evan Moore, claiming that the game's "storyline culminates in a cutscene in which the characters copulate in full digital nudity." On Wednesday, January 16, 2008, conservative blogger Kevin McCullough posts "GAMER rights to Lesbo-alien sex" on townhall.com. In response, the webcomic Penny Arcade publishes a satire of his action, titled "Gamers are godless liberal faggots." On Monday, January 21, "The Live Desk with Martha MacCallum" on Fox News ran the segment "'SE'XBOX? New video game shows full digital nudity and sex."[1] On the show, guest expert Cooper Lawrence is asked to comment on the "effects" of the game on those who play it and on the state of videogames generally, alongside Geoff Keighley of Spike TV to speak "in defense" of the game.

The story begins with MacCallum asserting that *Mass Effect* features full digital nudity and implies that it allows for player-controlled sex. MacCallum asks Lawrence how damaging the content may be. Lawrence says the sexual content of the game can have a desensitizing effect similar to violent content. Since the players see women as mere sexual objects, and "it's a man in this game deciding how many women he wants to be with," *Mass Effect* is potentially harmful, she concludes.

Keighley then points out that players can choose to be male or female in the game, and asks, "Cooper, have you ever played *Mass Effect*?" Her response is a short laugh followed by a dismissive "No." In response to a question by MacCallum about potential harm, Keighley emphasizes that the game responds to the player's choices, including the fact that the sex scene may never even happen. This prompts Lawrence – "Right. And a young boy's going to be choosing *not* to have sex; that'll be what they choose." Keighley fires back that it's not a "simple choice." Lawrence, saying "Darlin', I gotta go with the research," cites a University of Maryland study that argues adolescent boys "cannot tell the difference" between videogames and reality if they don't have related personal experience. MacCallum brings the

debate to a close by complimenting the game's artistry (and is forced to talk over a still-arguing Lawrence and Keighley). The segment ends with MacCallum discussing the story with her regular panel of guests, all of whom echo Lawrence's sentiments.

How did fans respond?

While it is doubtful that many fans actually saw the live broadcast of the "'SE'XBOX?" segment, once it was posted to YouTube and mentioned in various gamer blogs and forums, a variety of responses quickly emerged. Many gamers limited their discussions to gamer-focused sites, such as the forums at Penny Arcade, Kotaku, and the official *Mass Effect* forums. Others, however, took a more active approach; they ventured outside traditional arenas, to sites such as YouTube and Amazon.com. In the following, we consider gamer and fan activity in each of those three areas, where responses took both differing and common forms.

Blogs and forums

Kotaku, along with the blog gamepolitics.com, was one of the first game-related sites to discuss the Cybercast News Service article that labeled *Mass Effect* interactive pornography. One week after the broadcast, in an entry titled "Keighley sets Mass Effect Record Straight… or tries to," Kotaku posted a video of the Fox News broadcast, along with commentary (Crecente, 2008). The entry commends Keighley, ironically refers to Cooper Lawrence as an "expert" (in quotes), and observes that "…it's obvious that every one of the people who they had discussing it after the fact have not only never played Mass Effect, they probably heard about it five minutes before they were supposed to offer an opinion. Very shoddy." Each of these themes – commending Keighley, questioning Lawrence's credentials, and criticizing Fox News for dealing with something it knows nothing about, are echoed in the forum discussions, and wider responses to the controversy.

As the controversy grew, Kotaku continued to cover the unfolding drama. New entries appeared during the Amazon review bombing of Lawrence's book, when *Mass Effect* publisher Electronic Arts publicly demanded a correction and apology from Fox News (neither of which they received), when Lawrence recanted and apologized[2], and finally when Fox News invited EA to appear on "Live Desk with

Martha McCallum," ostensibly to defend their game.

Along with these updates, Kotaku offered its own analysis and commentary on the events. For example, in discussing Cooper Lawrence's apology, the Kotaku entry noted that it reflected poorly on Fox News and their "experts" (De Marco, 2008). The same article also surmised that Lawrence's apology was issued primarily in response to the abuse her book received at the hands of gamers: "...perhaps it will send a message to the so called "experts" they bring on the show to do their research before going on air. ...Hell hath no fury like a gamer scorned." In another entry addressing EA's invitation to appear on Fox News, Kotaku sides with the game publisher, arguing that what Fox News really needs to do is get its facts straight and apologize.

It is perhaps not surprising that Kotaku has a history of commenting on and criticizing the coverage of videogames by Fox News, and by extension other conservative media outlets; the controversy itself only served to cement that opinion. For example, a simple site search for "Fox News" turns up a number of entries such as one written on October 23, 2007, titled "Manhunt 2 + Fox News = Loud Noises" (McWhertor) discussing the specific approach that Fox News used to cover the controversial videogame *Manhunt 2*:

> If you're looking for intelligent debate about the extreme levels of violence in the Mature rated Manhunt 2 and how its release should be handled at retail or cogent discussion on the ESRB's ratings policies, look somewhere other than this Fox News clip [link now broken] from a segment known as "Cashin' In." The news channel for simpletons brings us a moronic shouting match between some lawyer we've never heard of with a gift for hyperbole and crazy conspiracy theories and some libertarian yokel named Jonathan Hoenig.

Of course, the "lawyer we have never heard of with a gift for hyperbole and crazy conspiracy theories" is Jack Thompson, and is written with irony. Kotaku clearly has little respect for Jack Thompson, and their opinion of Fox News is equally low. Kotaku's critiques of Fox News span a number of entries, and point to Fox's seeming obsession with finding negative effects of game playing. While hyperbolic at times, Kotaku makes valid points, demonstrating how Fox News demonizes videogames and players.

Much like Kotaku many gamers and fans discussing the Fox News story on the forums reacted with outrage, others, however, were more or less apathetic. Where some were obviously angry, others were not surprised and expected no differently. For those angered by *Mass Effect* story it was just one more example of how videogames are little understood by mainstream media. Angry gamers expressed frustration at the ignorance displayed by Fox News and especially Cooper Lawrence, and questioned why she was allowed to comment on topic about which she knew nothing. For example, in the appropriately titled thread "Fox news makes me angry," the original poster writes:

> God that [Fox News Broadcast] is *so full of bullshit* ... the psychologist person is so full of crap, she goes "the research shows that the average gamer is an adolescent boy!" when in fact the most recent surveys show that the average gamer is **twenty nine fucking years old**… [emphasized by the original poster] She then goes on about how the women are being treated as sex objects, and the guy tries to retaliate by saying that "the sex scene is not only optional, but comes about by complex character interaction, and the sex scene is such a tiny portion of the game", but then he gets cut off. It infuriates me because they are so ignorant.

As this example shows, some of the anger manifested less as coherent critiques of Fox News, and more as personal, negative attacks. The attacks directed at Fox News ranged from the relatively tame "Faux News" or "I hate Fox News" to more profanity-filled statements and euphemisms. However, most of the attacks on Lawrence were mean spirited, offensive, and often gender based, thematically similar to some of the YouTube videos discussed below.

Quite apart from the gamers who responded with outrage, a number of forum posters seemed more apathetic than angry. In their minds Fox News, and in some cases journalism in general, is already lost, and continuing to worry about it is a waste of time that only validates its existence. Other posters were content to simply call them clueless, ignorant, or out of touch. To such posters Fox News, and other media, simply do not understand videogames (and never have), and thus it is no surprise that they get things wrong.

In addition to being a venue to vent anger and frustration, online forums offered a way for gamers

to organize a wider response to the Fox News broadcast. One poster (Pugnate from the Penny Arcade forums), for example, called on his/her fellow gamers to email the cable network, even providing a link. Other posts and threads alerted gamers to the review bombing going on at Amazon.com. Kyougu, another poster from the Penny Arcade forums did little more than link to the Amazon review page and write, "check out the reviews for Cooper Lawrence's book." Other posters felt that the Amazon review bombing was something special, something one should be proud to be a part of. One poster on the Gamespy forums, named Revelation_Space, summed this up:

> [The Amazon review bombing] is really really awesome. I rated her book 1 star as well, just to contribute. Always nice when gamers pull together and forget their hatred for each other to fight a common enemy.

Alongside the calls to action, however, was a concern that gamers responding to the broadcast would only make the image problem worse. Some feared that flooding Amazon with hate-filled reviews or sending Fox News profanity laced emails would only exacerbate the image of gamers as maladjusted and anti-social, thus playing right into the hands of Fox News. VoodooV, on the Penny Arcade forums, wrote of the Amazon review-bombing of Lawrence's book:

> Sadly, the raid, which started out great, has just turned into vandalism… I've read some of the reviews that wish violence upon her now, which is just completely unacceptable. What's worse, is that the pundits will cherry pick those kinds of comments and ignore the tastefully done ones and use them to paint her as a victim and will only further their viewpoint that gamers are nothing but thugs.

Also, in the thread where Pugnate calls for gamers to email Fox News, NicktheNewbie writes "I think the idea of having all of the PA forums e-mail fox news is a bad idea. A VERY bad idea." Pugnate agrees and cautions fellow gamers to follow proper decorum if emailing Fox News because "we shouldn't play into any stereotypes about gamers."

Finally, true to the model of participatory culture, gamers also used the forums to advertise and circulate a variety of fan-made texts created in response to the controversy. One such significant artifact

was the Penny Arcade comic posted on January 15, 2008. Penny Arcade is a popular gaming-focused webcomic, as well as a source for gaming news and a place for gamers to gather and interact through forums. For these and other reasons[3] Penny Arcade is a pillar of the online gamer community, and the two gamers that run it, who go by the handles Gabe (artist Mike Krahulik) and Tycho (writer Jerry Holkins), are essentially alpha fans – their opinions are taken seriously within the community, which makes their response to the controversy significant and noteworthy.

The comic itself is not a response to the Fox News report, but instead a reaction to the CSNS article by Kevin McCullough. The comic portrays McCullough sitting in front of his computer talking to himself, evidently regretting lying about *Mass Effect* (or, as in the strip, "Mars Effect"). McCullough then checks the number of page views his article received and notes they are surprisingly high; he theorizes that angering gamers is a good thing, and might be his ticket out of obscurity. In the final panel we see McCullough's new article titled "Gamers are Godless Liberal Faggots." The strip's argument is that McCullough, and others like him, not only don't know anything about videogames or gamers, but also don't want to. Instead they are manipulative opportunists who know they can turn videogames into a controversial, lucrative issue by stretching the truth and sensationalizing stories.

YouTube Videos

Ranging from outright parody to deconstructions of the flaws in Fox News' coverage, the user-created content on YouTube expressed many users' dissatisfaction with the story, the journalistic integrity of Fox News, the *personal* integrity of Cooper Lawrence, and support for both *Mass Effect* and Geoff Keighley. The forty-two videos we examined can be roughly divided into two types: parodies and commentary. Though different in form, the general tone of the two types of videos—fans expressing disbelief, anger, and frustration – is mostly the same.

Parody videos represent a smaller fraction of the total videos examined. Generally, they remix existing content or create new content to respond to the Fox News story. Remix parodies use disparate pieces of video and audio to construct a commentary on the Fox News story. The primary weapon of the remix parody is juxtaposition: rearranging video and audio recodes the original messages into new

content that subverts the original reading of the Fox News story. These videos vary in production values, and the content is equally diverse: one video portrays the male version of the *Mass Effect* main character appearing to "punch out" Martha MacCallum, while another is one in a long list of YouTube videos that re-subtitle a scene from the movie *Der Untergang* (*Downfall*), implying that the Fox News segment was an attempt by Hitler to get back at Microsoft for banning his Xbox Live account. Some videos focus on pointing out factual inaccuracies, while others simply attack/mock Fox News, Cooper Lawrence or Martha MacCallum. In "Do Not Trust Fox News" one of the Fox News panelists asks what happened to videogames like *Pac-Man* and pinball; the video then splices in footage of the notorious Atari 2600 game *Custer's Revenge*, in which the player controls a naked Custer as he attempts to rape a bound Native American woman.

Of all the remix parodies, "I'm a psychologist slash feminazi and men are SCUMM!" was the lowest in production values, consisting of a frozen screen of Cooper Lawrence accompanied by a highly stylized, falsetto male voice over. The video is one minute, fifty seconds of vilification, focusing on Lawrence's intelligence ("I was too stupid for a PhD") and her lack of perspective on the actual content of *Mass Effect*. The video is also very critical of Lawrence as a woman; the creator implies that she must be a feminist as an explanation of why she sees over sexualized content in the game and why she must make an issue about it. In other words, some sort of politicized identity-construct, such as feminism, is the only explanation for such concerns.

Most remix parodies call into question the validity of the story or revel in the content's hysterical unreality through pastiche and juxtaposition. By simultaneously commenting on and lampooning the position, parodies offer comic release from the tension of the situation.

A second type of parody, imitation parody, is not a pastiche of other content, but original content designed to imitate a cable news story (Fox News in particular). There were only two such parodies, but they are distinguished by their high production values. Both videos lampoon the perceived mistakes and foibles of the Fox News broadcast, including the abrupt cutting off of a game expert by the host, a pseudo-academic expert guest with questionable credentials and assertions, and a harangued gamer

looking to stick up for the industry. In true satirical form, no one is safe; the host in "Mass Effect: the Parody" intones that their guest has "thirteen master's degrees, some even from accredited universities," while his counterpart in "Max Effect" describes the sexual customization options in the game as control over "height, weight, bust size, and skin color, as well as the firmness of their ass, whether or not they shave their body hair, and how it tastes when you nibble longingly on their earlobe."

While other types of fan response also include video and remixing, none are as complex, or well made as these imitation parodies. This may be why they are the lowest in number among the videos sampled. The technology available to these groups allowed them to create parodies of great sophistication and visual appeal that is not typically available to the majority of gamers.

Of the 42 videos analyzed only six were parodies, the rest were commentaries. They have little in common other than that almost all are "talking head" videos (or in one case, "talking shark hand puppet") providing commentary on the situation in general. Some videos are detailed point-by-point criticisms of the Fox News story, while others are undiluted vitriol toward Fox News, the individuals in the story, or the media generally. The delivery method is relatively universal: the camera faces a single male individual (none of the commentary videos featured women) in his space of choice.[4] The subject typically addresses the camera in the "video blog" style, delivering his message. There are a small number of diversions from this formula, such as "Zeke the Shark – 'Mass Effect/FOX News'" that features a shark hand puppet given an affected voice. Another respondent speaks from behind an apparently faux metal medieval facemask. With the exception of a user who uploaded the rant of a relative ("Dans opinion on Fox News bashing *Mass Effect*"), all of the videos appear to be self-created.

The content of the commentary videos varies broadly. However, there are some discernible trends. First are point-by-point rebuttals, where the speaker either quotes the story directly or indirectly, or shows a clip of the story and then responds to the content cited. These videos vary from being reasonably emotionally detached ("Dear Fox News: Regarding Mass Effect," "RE: Fox Fumes Over Microsoft's *Mass Effect* Xbox Game") to outright incendiary ("A Darkness Rant: FOX FREAKING NEWS"). Regardless of emotional valence, the point of these videos is in laying out the story's

inconsistencies and factual errors, lambasting Fox News and Cooper Lawrence, and expressing shock and dismay at the story in general.

A number of videos draw on outside research to refute the claims made by the Fox News story, particularly the claim that gamers are predominantly male and that most are under the age of 18. The creator of "Cooper Lawrence Is A Bitch" claims he could debunk any of the research Cooper presents with "5 minutes and a keyboard."

A similar theme is the rejection of effects-based arguments. Almost universally, the users in these videos dismiss the possibility that sexual or violent content in games leads to consequent real life behaviors. The responses here are anecdotal; Darknessthecurse, in "A Darkness Rant," claims that one of the studies Cooper Lawrence cites is null and void because he himself doesn't exhibit that behavior. Similarly, Sichae begins his video by saying "Played *Mass Effect*; beat it. Twenty hours, I believe. Saw the sex scene; didn't want to wank it."

The issue of gender in these commentaries is quite volatile. Some users imply that the possibility of playing a female character precludes the game being sexist or-potentially damaging to women. Attitudes about gender become very apparent in occasional attacks on Lawrence that reached disturbing levels of misogyny. "Cooper Lawrence Is A Bitch – With Some Personal Commentary" is by far the most egregious offender here; over the course of the video, the creator calls Cooper a cunt, a "hippocrate" [sic], and "one of the cuntiest women I have ever seen open their trap on TV or in print." At one point, the words "You stand on your book cover with your slutty pose and whorish smirk and dare to speak of video games sending messages of a sexual nature?" are superimposed over the cover of *The Cult of Perfection*.

This video is not alone in these attacks. User Zoppklotch spends considerable time referencing gender, particularly his perception of Cooper Lawrence as "the most stuck up, textbook feminist Nazi I've ever wasted my time listening to the points of." He questions why Cooper's attacks are directed solely at men; he wonders why she doesn't consider the effect of games on female players, but the argument is framed in the terms of reverse discrimination rather than asking what *unique* effects games might have on women.

Darknessthecurse finds Cooper's focus on men similarly troublesome: "For the second time in this report this woman insults me as a male who respects women. She's a… I think she's a feminist. I think she is. She sounds like one." Interesting that his use of the word 'feminist' is an invective, the implication being that feminism is negative, and Cooper's arguments are misplaced and foolish because they are borne of feminism.

The common thread in these videos is their emotional content. Rather than the sarcastic focus of the parodies, individual commentary is about expressing personal ideology. Even those videos that tear down the Fox News story in a systemic fashion do so in a way that expresses the emotional affect – hurt, rage, disgust, distrust, annoyance – that the viewer felt when originally experiencing the story. The place of the rant, then, is not necessarily ideological argument, but the need to express one's fury to the world in tangible form.

Review bombing on Amazon.com

Another strategy angry fans used to express their frustration was "review bombing" Cooper Lawrence's recent book, *The Cult of Perfection: Making Peace with Your Inner Overachiever*. By Friday of the week the story aired, there were 472 "user reviews" of Lawrence's book. Using the tools that Amazon had provided, angry fans quickly and easily commandeered the site as a space for talking back to Lawrence regarding her alleged knowledge of *Mass Effect*, as well as her general credibility. They posted outraged reviews of her book, gave her the lowest rating possible, and attached "tags" to her book that were personal and insulting.

Of those reviews, 412 gave the book 1 star (the minimum allowed), while another 48 gave it 2 stars. Users also tagged Lawrence's book with tags such as "ignorant" (929), "garbage" and "hypocrisy" (744 each), and "hack" and "hypocrite" (710 each). Perhaps not coincidentally, on Friday, January 25, Cooper Lawrence apologized in an interview with the New York Times, saying that she "misspoke" about the content of the game and that she had seen more sexually explicit content on the television show *Lost*.

During that week, Amazon began purging reviews from the site, leading to further anger from gamers who felt their actions and speech were being censored. Individuals continued to post new reviews,

and roughly three months later (April 16, 2008), 68 reviews remained, of which 57 gave the book one star and 8 gave it two stars. Gamers and interested others also began to leave comments on various reviews, as well as engage in extended discussions on Amazon's forums. Overall, discussion was spirited and intense.

It's important to note why particular language appears in the reviews that remained (as of April 2008). In one of the discussion threads titled "An ex-Amazon employee to all who are complaining about reviews being taken down," self-identified ex-employee Robert Rowland states that the reason so many initial reviews were deleted was because they were "not about the material printed in the book" and if gamers did wish to have their reviews remain, they should be "smart enough to phrase their review in such a way that they appear to have read the book." Following that advice, many of the remaining reviews make explicit mention of the reviewer having bought the book for a mother, sister, girlfriend, or wife, or obtaining the book by looking at it in the store, or reading it at the library. They then comment that based on such exposure, the book failed to meet expectations.

Most reviews suggest that the book contains simplistic ideas that are mostly common sense. For example, the "most helpful critical review" of the book, by Kevin Leistman, opens: "this book is a pointless read and filled with old, rehashed ideas. Cooper Lawrence offers no new insight to the deeper problems that cause someone to need to be an over achiever." Similarly, Matthew Wheeler, self-identifying as a psychology professor, writes that the book offers "trite advice to women on how to deal with being successful." While the content of the book was sometimes addressed, other aspects also came under review, including the cover and, most importantly, the author's credibility.

Reviewers who commented on the cover, which features a photo of Cooper Lawrence standing facing the camera in jeans and a form fitting black sleeveless top, with her hands on her hips, consistently reacted negatively to it, such as the unnamed author of "Bland and lacks substance" who says it "makes one wonder if this author is valuing herself as a woman other than her sexuality." Another user, Bob, "noticed the cover: an unattractive woman sassing me."

But most importantly, the reviewers take issue with Lawrence's credibility. Some reference her appearance on Fox News, saying she spoke out of ignorance, while others attempt to throw the charge

back at her, claiming her book relies on little to no evidence, suggesting she has not done "enough research" on the topic to know what she is talking about.

Explicit references to her appearance on Fox News are typified by reviews such as "After hearing this authors recent comments on Fox News, I went ahead and got the book from the library. … She has done no research, and is just trying to make a quick dollar off the controversy" by Computerdude1032. Likewise, Justin writes that "the only reason I read this book was because of her outrageous claims that she made on fox news."

As the above comments indicate, it was often difficult for reviewers to separate Lawrence's appearance and actions on Fox News with her credibility as an author. Some reviewers were more successful, particularly those who questioned her credentials as a psychologist. But other reviews attacked Lawrence's credibility in sly ways that echoed the main criticism of her appearance on Fox News—that she was speaking about something she knew very little of, and she had done no research to substantiate her arguments.

In addition to the reviews, there was considerable commentary, both in reply to various reviews and in Amazon's forums. Overall, much of the discussion found on the forums was civil and well argued, with only a few posters resorting to attacks and illogical reasoning to make their cases. While some posters have since deleted their original postings, many still remain.

Posters to these discussions mostly complained about Amazon's removal of reviews. While some individuals claimed Amazon was a business entitled to take any action it wanted to preserve civility on its site, the most interesting responses came from posters who argued their reviews were valuable assessments of her credibility as an author—particularly of a non-fiction book where she claims expertise in psychology.

David Johnson wrote "If someone wrote a non-fiction book containing medical advice, and was caught lying or making up things (about anything-it doesn't matter what), that authors credibility and character is called into question and it would affect my decision on whether or not to purchase the book. Cooper has shown herself willing to make up facts, statistics, and pretend to know things she does not.

This is a reflection on her character, but also on the material she presents in her books." Similarly, S. Long adds that "her reliability, her truthfulness, speaks directly to the quality of her books … we should be able to review the _AUTHOR_ of a book, as well as the individual book itself."

Individuals who review bombed Lawrence's book found an easy outlet at Amazon, although that outlet quickly began censoring such reviews until they gave an appearance of reviewing the book in question. While most reviews were fairly basic and attacked the book's content, its cover, and the credibility and reputation of the author, more detailed and thoughtful discussion was found in Amazon's discussion forum, where individuals were not bound to strictly commenting on a book. In these forums, gamers were using their 'outside face,' actively responding to non-gamers who questioned their motives and actions. While a few responded immaturely, others provided reasoned and researched replies, countering stereotypes of immature, inept game players. On Amazon's pages, game players took a stand to defend their interests, and did so in a variety of ways.

How were fan responses shaped by the current media landscape?

In the William Shatner story noted above, outraged *Star Trek* fans had limited means to respond to Shatner's outburst. Fans might have written to NBC, to Shatner himself, or perhaps to magazines and newspapers. They could have called NBC or each other by telephone, or perhaps a lucky few might have had access to the earliest stirrings of the Internet. However, their responses and the feedback on their responses were delayed by time and distance.

The fan response to Cooper Lawrence's appearance on Fox News, by contrast, shows the extent to which the current level of computer-mediated communication technology enables an entirely different fan response. There is no need to wait until a letter can be mailed to the network; indeed, broadcast and cable news outlets regularly use email messages during programs as commentary. Collaboration with other fans, to consider a plan of attack or to otherwise communicate with others, is as simple for many fans as posting on the proper forum. The responses we've examined here show that fans have technology available for immediate response, and that potential has enabled them to have their voices heard.

In an economic sense, the many reviews of Lawrence's book on Amazon are a reflection of how fans can exercise their long-touted economic clout (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 2006). It's not entirely clear if *most* of the fans or respondents wrote negative reviews of her book were doing so to hurt sales. They may only have wanted to exact retribution on a person for a perceived wrong. However, as Amazon forum responders such as David Johnson point out, there is an actual value to such reviews: if the author lacks credibility, then the credibility of the book should also be questioned. Certainly, the review bombing was an immediate and visceral way for fans to show their displeasure in an economic arena. And their rapid, massive response demonstrates how niche markets can exercise clout in ways not previously imagined (Hills, 2002).

The tone expressed by the fans at Amazon is considerably different from that found on gamer-focused sites, forums, and blogs. The satirical commentary at Penny Arcade, or the aggressive attack of Kotaku's coverage, speaks to a different sort of response. Consider the posters on the Penny Arcade forums who, in a whirlwind of invectives, warned against storming Fox News. That sort of post – a venting of anger to an audience that appreciates it – is exactly what appears on forums and YouTube. Yet for the most part, the Amazon reviews and discussion were found to be, if not always well reasoned, at least civil.

In other words different online venues allow for different expressions of fandom. At Kotaku and Penny Arcade, and in YouTube videos, responses pointed to the affective response of fans: angry, upset, hurt, and derisive. Posters knew they were speaking to an audience that understood their fury and their emotions, and the messages they created reflected that. As many fans said, however, showing that face to the rest of the world would only result in harming the image of gamers and fans. Thus those who chose to respond on Amazon did so with a "public face;" working within Amazon's constraints for reviews and forum posts, they expressed their displeasure in a more reasoned fashion.

The YouTube videos present an interesting fusion. On the one hand, the videos sampled echo the emotional responses of forum posters or the satirical bite of webcomics. On the other hand, the audience for a YouTube video is, on the whole, unknown. Rather than speaking to others who share in

their fandom, or the economic structure in which the target of their displeasure functions, fans posting YouTube videos appear simply to be speaking to the universe at large. This may be why a number of the videos, while retaining the emotional quality of forum responses, also tend toward deconstruction of the story as well. It may be that this deconstruction is a method of driving the point home to the unknown YouTube viewer why the story on *Mass Effect* is, to the video creators, so appalling.

These events indicate a growing awareness among fans of not only their potential influence, but also the multiple ways they can choose to express themselves. This suggests a more complex model of Jenkins' participatory culture, as we see not simply 'response' from fans but a variety of responses and explicit discussion (in some quarters) as to what type of response is most appropriate in a particular venue. While certainly not all fan responses were so carefully considered, it does suggest a growing savvy among fans as to their "niche market" status, as well as the impulse from some fans to reach out to other groups, and explain their position.

However, many fans made no such distinctions, venting across gamer forums, in YouTube videos, and in early 'reviews' of Lawrence's book. As Taylor argued in relation to *World of Warcraft* mods created by hardcore raiders, such examples of emergence arising from greater player input and control "should not be simply equated with the utopic or nonhierarchical" (2006b, p. 334). In this study there were clearly many dystopic responses by fans, and some fans sought to exert control over other fans' responses—from Penny Arcade through posters on Amazon's site asking others to be more civil. Thus, the media landscape offers fans a multitude of opportunities to participate in larger conversations about contemporary culture. Fans are negotiating those avenues in a multitude of ways, not all of them celebratory, and most of them increasingly complex and varied.

How did fans conceptualize the enemy in their responses?

From the above observations, one can clearly see how gamers conceptualize their 'enemy' in their responses to the Fox News report. 'Enemy' may seem a strong word, but we believe it is fitting. It's clear that more than a few gamers felt that they and their hobby were under attack, and their responses were thus a form of retaliation. The enemy this case refers primarily to Fox News and to

Cooper Lawrence, the entity and the individual most targeted in fan responses.

Fox News

In their responses, fans were quick to label Fox News as ignorant and out of touch in understanding videogames. Kotaku has a long history of commenting on Fox News' inability to cover videogames in a "fair and balanced" manner. To them the *Mass Effect* story is just another example of Fox News getting it wrong when it comes to videogames. This sentiment is clearly echoed on forums and in YouTube responses, where fans refer to the cable network as "faux news" and some point to the *Mass Effect* story as further proof that Fox has no credibility as a news agency.

Where some fans see Fox News as ignorant, others attribute to the news agency some kind of explicit anti-videogame agenda. This attitude, it should be noted, was less common among responses than simply dismissing Fox News as incompetent. Kotaku, for example, suggests that the way Fox News covers videogames has become a pattern, indicating an underlying agenda. Several gamers posting in forums suggest that Fox News is over the top and alarmist in regards to videogames because their audience (described as being old and out of touch) is already convinced videogames are evil and the network is simply pandering to its base.

Cooper Lawrence

Across media forms, fan responses characterized Cooper Lawrence in a number of ways, questioned her credentials, and labeled her as ignorant and incompetent. Kotaku, for example, questions Lawrence's credentials when it refers to her, ironically, as an "expert" (quotes intentional). This is mirrored in both YouTube videos and Amazon reviews, as fans utilized these avenues to dispute the idea that Lawrence knew what she was talking about. And among the various responses it is not just Lawrence's ignorance vis-à-vis videogames that is questioned, but also her stances on gender, and her references to outside research.

The most alarming conceptualizations of Cooper Lawrence, however, were the gender-based responses resorting to blatant sexism and misogyny. This is seen most clearly in the YouTube video posts where the use of gendered slurs was common. This mentality is one apparently shared by many

fans, as YouTube videos were not the only gendered attacks on Lawrence. Gendered slurs were likewise frequent in the various forum discussions analyzed, wherein fans were just as likely to attack Lawrence's gender as her ideological stance on *Mass Effect*. Issues of gender were also prevalent in the Amazon reviews, notably in comments about the book's cover. In particular, responses called Lawrence a hypocrite for using her sexuality to sell her book while condemning sexuality and sexual content in videogames. While the Amazon reviews were arguably more civil, using less offensive language (Amazon likely deleted any such offensive reviews), they nonetheless shared similar themes.

Such sexist responses indicate that hegemonic masculinity persists within gamer culture. Kaja Silverman (1992) refers to hegemonic masculinity as the 'dominant fiction,' or the gender ideology that infuses every aspect of our lives. While Silverman studies alternative masculinities in relation to a hegemonic norm, the norm, in this case, defines men in terms of their proper role as head of the (patriarchal) family, and as the embodiment of the ideal phallus – powerful, aggressive, and sexually dominant over the submissive feminine. Nick Trujillo (1984) also explores hegemonic masculinity, emphasizing that public ideals of masculinity center on powerful, rugged men such as the Marlboro man, the Hollywood action hero and the frontier cowboy. While videogame players have never been positioned as part of that ideal themselves, such positioning does not stop them from attempting to enact some of those valorized traits.

In a study of the intersection of videogames and hegemonic masculinity, Dutton (2007b) analyzes the role of "Chuck Norris Facts" in *World of Warcraft* and the larger player culture. Chuck Norris Facts, a popular Internet meme, are amusing (fictional) anecdotes ostensibly about the venerable action star, but more accurately about iconic traits of hegemonic masculinity. While Chuck Norris is part of the joke, the jokes work less because they are about Norris, and more because they are exaggerations of masculine traits such as strength, violence, and virility. The appropriation and later transformation of Chuck Norris Facts by *WoW* players, represents an acknowledgement and celebration of hegemonic masculinity within *WoW* player culture. Just as the example of Chuck Norris facts indicates that some elements of hegemonic masculinity can be ironically celebrated in player cultures,

this study shows that some of the uglier elements of masculinity are present as well. That is, alongside their humorous celebrations of masculinity, one finds sexist players, misogyny, and the verbal abuse of women. In addition, this study shows that players also perform hegemonic masculinity outside of their in-game activities, in more public areas such as YouTube videos and Amazon reviews.

What does it mean to be a fan now?

Being a fan isn't a singular identity, or the performance of a specific group of activities. Many game players and fans, of *Mass Effect* in particular, may have either never encountered the Fox News segment, or saw an entry about it on Kotaku or the comic on Penny Arcade, read it, perhaps also glanced at a few comments, and then moved on, doing nothing. Yet for those who wished to respond, there were a multitude of avenues to take. The majority posted to a game forum, voicing anger, disdain, or some other sentiment among their fellow gamers. A small group chose to "review" Cooper Lawrence's book, while an even smaller subset created a video response. Those groups were not necessarily related, yet the cross talk between forum posters about review bombing and the trading of fan-created media artifacts suggests at least some fans engaged in multiple responses.

There were also different levels of fans helping to direct responses. We mentioned earlier the "alpha fan" status of Penny Arcade creators Gabe and Tycho. Their early response helped draw attention to the unfolding event, and also set the tone for possible responses. Their construction of McCullough as one of many "blowhards" or "jerks" out to raise his page views, rather than someone voicing a legitimate concern about videogames, positioned McCullough and all such writers as outsiders, as enemies, who 'just don't get' nor care about the realities of contemporary videogame and popular culture.

Likewise, the role and positioning of Kotaku itself is important, and deserving of critique. Equal parts opinionated blog and news site, Kotaku prides itself on its rapid reporting of events in the game industry. The site often takes a one-sided stance in relation to newsmakers it deems unfair or uninformed, as it has repeatedly done with Fox News. And its penchant for drawing page views competes with its role as an impartial or balanced purveyor of news. Its cult of personality for its

authors, along with its cultivation of controversy, also invokes the image of the alpha fan. In response, the many comments generated by controversial stories reinforce an image of lead fans alerting other fans to conflict, and then helping to channel and direct that response. This isn't to suggest that effort is wrong or manipulative, but rather that the role of newsmakers and fans in the world of videogames is increasingly blurred.

Earlier we discussed how the value fans create through their labors can be important economically, and how it can exist in tension with the commercial game industry. Even as Penny Arcade and Kotaku serve as alpha fans, they also profit from the controversy they generate. While claiming the high ground in condemning those who 'know nothing' about videogames, they are of course not simply doing so to generate righteous indignation. Their harnessing of other fans and their activities speaks to the power that all fans now engender. Blog and comic readers, as well as Fox News viewers, aren't simply blank slates to take direction from others, yet if so inclined, such artifacts can provide a convenient imperative to act.

Furthermore, fans that create videos and write reviews themselves generate value, or in some cases seek to take it away. It was little surprise that EA refused to appear on Fox News to refute the false charges made against *Mass Effect.* Why should they? Without any effort on their part, dozens of video responses and hundreds of reviews appeared, challenging the veracity of Fox's claims. Lawrence apologized less than a week later in *The New York Times*, and sales of *Mass Effect* continued, offering enough support for the developer to create a sequel, released in January 2010..

Prior research has begun to examine how fans create value for particular products, especially fans focused on mod creation (Postigo, 2007) as well as their status as a niche market (Hills, 2002). Yet, there has been little work exploring how fans might *destroy value*. Dedicated readers of game forums know how much fans can "bitch" about the games they play, in Jenkins' terms, but how much do we know about how fans might reduce or destroy the value of those experiences for others, either measured through reduced enjoyment, or the abandonment of play? Likewise, as Lawrence's review bombing demonstrates, fans can seek retribution on those who devalue their interests, by devaluing what their

'enemies' hold dear. Given the tools available through "Web 2.0," fans now wield more power than ever before. How can we account for that activity and that potential for destruction? Clearly our models of fan activity have to be augmented to look at how fans destruct as well as construct, in a variety of settings and ways.

Finally, being a fan now means many different things, some of them contradictory. We cannot so easily distinguish fans from "the media," as often they are one and the same. Fans can produce more professional (Kotaku) and less professional (remix parody videos) media themselves, and can rapidly and globally articulate their discontent with other media makers. Fans can create value through their activities as alpha fans, and they can also drive value creation of objects of their desire. Jenkins has also documented how hierarchies emerge among fans (2006), yet more work needs to take into account how the work of a few fans can so significantly direct and shape the response of others. As media companies recognize the value of alpha fans, so too the alpha fans respond and attempt to preserve their advantages. How does that ultimately play out in larger fan activity and in fan communities? We need more detailed studies that investigate fan hierarchies, and how fans can follow as well as rebel against their fellow fans.

Fans can also sow seeds of discord through misogynist, rage-filled and boorish activities. Just as some fans work to dispel stereotypes of the typical game player, others play right into such images. Taylor's critique of the allegedly 'utopian' space for gamers is relevant here, as we must recognize the ways some fans attempt to re-inscribe hegemonic norms relative to masculinity, and the 'proper' performances of femininity (Taylor, 2006b). Likewise, the backlash against feminism found in YouTube videos in particular demonstrates how an open media landscape can not only allow sexist discourse to emerge, but create a space for it to be accepted, if not actively condoned and reinforced.

In conclusion, fans are multiple and varied, blurring the border between media creators and their audiences. Just as we cannot see fans as "good" and consumers as "bad," we must acknowledge that being a fan now is a multiple, contradictory, value-laden set of activities, as well as an identity that can shift and morph across media forms, time periods, and the interest levels of individuals. Academic

study of fan activity has begun to take account of such shifts, but as our case study indicates, we must continue to monitor and theorize videogame fan activity, as it now offers increased avenues and opportunities for fans to respond, as well as opportunities to destroy value, and re-inscribe sexist discourses at the same time.

Endnotes

[1] As of this writing, the story is viewable in its entirety on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0kdm7fg804.

[2] At least partly in response to the review bombing of her book on Amazon Cooper Lawrence recanted her statements from the Fox broadcast and apologized. She is quoted in the New York Times as saying "I recognize that I misspoke. I really regret saying that, and now that I've seen the game and seen the sex scenes it's kind of a joke" (Schiesel, 2009).

[3] Penny Arcade is well known for their ability to organize the gamer community to action; perhaps the best example is the charity Child's Play, which organizes the distribution of toys and games to hospital-bound children. Interestingly, Child's Play was formed by Penny Arcade authors Krahulik and Holkins in response to a story by journalist Bill France that suggested gamers were made antisocial and violent by game content (http://www.childsplaycharity.org/about.php).

[4] We should note that the influence of female creators cannot be reliably determined in the parody videos.

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