Pirates and Poachers:
Fan Fiction and the Conventions of Reading and Writing

Margaret Mackey   and   **Jill Kedersha McClay**

School of Library & Information Studies   Dept. of Elementary Education

University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

margaret.mackey@ualberta.ca   jill.mcclay@ualberta.ca

Contact author: Margaret Mackey
                    School of Library and Information Studies
                    3-20 Rutherford South
                    University of Alberta
                    Edmonton, AB, Canada T6G 2J4

                    telephone 780-492-2605
                    fax 780-492-2430

What is fan fiction and what does it teach its creators and critics? This article explores a writing and reading phenomenon and looks at what it can mean for the English classroom.

Wikipedia defines fan fiction as follows:

a broadly-defined term for fiction about characters or settings written by fans of the original work, rather than by the original creators. Fan fiction usually describes works which are uncommissioned by the owner of the work, and usually (but not always) works which are not professionally published. Fan fiction is defined against original fiction, which exists with its own discrete universe, and against canon works within the universe. Most fan fiction writers assume that their readers have knowledge of the canon universe in which their works are based (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fan_fiction , accessed August 30, 2007).

Henry Jenkins (1992) borrowed the word "poachers" from Michel de Certeau (1984) to describe the creators of fan fiction. The frame of poaching offers a way to describe very active modes of reading, viewing and gaming that lead to imaginative reworking; Jenkins speaks of "readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests [and] spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture" (23).

The Internet has made fan fiction more broadly available than at any time in history, though the phenomenon itself is not new. We will explore what fan fiction and its cultures can tell us about writers and readers in both celebratory and critical modes. Although fan fiction arises from stories in many formats and is produced in verbal, film,

game, and visual guises, we will focus on written fan fiction for the purposes of a specific argument about its potential role in the classroom.

In this article, we investigate some of the qualities of fan fiction and its place in contemporary culture (using the example of *Pirates of the Caribbean*), look at its role in the development of writers and explore its potential for productive classroom activities.

Critical aspects: Slippery texts in a culture of unfinish

The starting point for our enquiry into fan fiction draws on Peter Lunenfeld's (2000/1999) concept of "an aesthetic of unfinish" (11), which suggests that the "universal solvent of the digital" (14) has rendered all our intellectual activities open to re-working. Such re-working may be commercially inspired (the film, the book of the film, the game of the film, the back story of how the film was made, etc.) or may originate with readers themselves. In any case, what results is what Kristie S. Fleckenstein (2003) calls slippery texts, "artifacts that slip and slide across the boundaries of an imageword ecology. . . . Loosely defined, slippery texts are artifacts that keep us positioned on the edges that blur, the edges where literacy evolves" (104-105). Fan fiction is one relatively democratic version of that impetus to re-work, to open up a previously finished story and turn it into a slippery text. The Internet forum offers us the advantage of access not only to the fiction itself but also to posted reader responses to that fiction and to norm-setting "community policing" work by the fan fiction community.

The Internet has made it possible for fans creating new stories about favourite characters to speak to each other, and has made a broad set of such fictions available. Yet imaginative reworking of stories does not require sophisticated technology; Wolf and

Heath (1992) remind us that small children do such reworking on a daily basis: "A text that is known to a child does not remain in its original state or even in a steady, stable form; instead, the child rewrites it. Texts become transformative stock to which young readers can return again and again" (109-110).

Some fan fictions are created to prolong and extend a deep immersion in a story world. Others are written to parody or critique such a world. The Internet offers a broader public for the kinds of story transformations that were previously private and internal or restricted to a very small outside readership.

Fan fiction and the conventions of reception

Peter Rabinowitz (1987) provides a "toolkit" that offers productive ways of analysing this body of fan fiction in terms of what it can tell us about the creators' understanding of established and "slippery" narrative conventions. His "rules of reading," which include rules of notice, signification, configuration and coherence, are drawn from 19th and 20th century standard print narrative. However, they provide a surprisingly robust framework for analysing narrative in evolving literary forms and formats, and their application to fan fiction is highly productive of new insights.

Take, for example, Rabinowitz's *rules of notice*. When we read, we do not pay equal attention to every word. We make decisions about major characters who require our close attention and minor characters who can be relegated to the background of our mental image of the story. We pay heed to early plot events that are likely to have significant consequences later in the story and make provisional decisions about how they should be interpreted.

A fan fiction is written by and for people who are already familiar with the canonical story from which the fanfic is derived. In a derivative story, the rules of notice operate on a different basis. Readers are already familiar with main characters, events and themes, and are already watching for their appearance; the conventions that invoke special notice do not need to be put into effect in the same way. Foreshadowing is often simplified so that a simple mention of a canonical event to come is sufficient.

Rules of signification help us decide how to attend to what we have decided is important via the rules of notice. These conventions also work differently in fan fiction. Readers may well recognise characters and events from the original story, but they need to be able to decide whether this particular fanfic is a straight emulation of the prior work, whether it is parodic or satirical in intent, or indeed, whether it is downright subversive. Some paratextual elements of web publishing provide cues; for example, fiction labelled alt. (an alternative version of a canonical universe) or slash (stories involving – usually male – homosexual relationships between characters who may not be portrayed as gay in the canonical version) is almost certainly going to be more subversive than the fiction of admiration and emulation, but many of the cues have to be extrapolated from the piece of writing itself.

In similar ways, the *rules of configuration* and the *rules of coherence* mutate with fan fiction. Rules of configuration aid readers in developing an understanding of how events are linked and patterned. Rules of coherence are largely applied after the reading is concluded and provide ways to make the best possible sense of the story as a whole. Both these undertakings in fan fiction require readers to take account of the originating universe as well as the immediate story under consideration.

Fan fiction offers a window onto such processes of mutation, of ways in which texts are "rendered slippery" by authors, often young, who have grown up with a tacit understanding of writerly and readerly convention that makes room for metamorphosis. Often the fan fiction authors create material that embodies a critique of the original source, and develops critical perspectives that may or may not be explicit but that are certainly assumed to be understood by the readers. Analysis of fan fictions may provide a new lens on the workings of this kind of critical thinking by young authors and readers.

Pirates of the Caribbean

This article will explore contemporary production and reception of, and interactions with, fan fictions and fan fiction cultures. In such research, at "the edges where literacy evolves" (Fleckenstein, 2003, 104-105), even such terms as production, reception, and interaction can become somewhat "slippery," as the engagements are multi-faceted and evolve with an individual's experiences and intentions.

Our primary textual example is *Pirates of the Caribbean*, the Walt Disney movie and sequels starring Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow. From the moment of the first appearance of the first movie, this film was "slippery." It is an unusual adaptation in that its origin is a theme park ride that features in Disney parks around the world, so it features allusions to and "quotes" from the experience of that ride rather than from a text more literary in origin.

A "textualised" narrative description of this ride (another slippery version, this one somewhere between an official and a fan description) can be found on Wikipedia; a sample passage reads as follows:

The boats glide gently past a thunderstorm tossing an old pirate ship about, though the captain driving the ship is nothing more than a skeleton. The boats pass through the Crews Quarters, complete with skeletal pirates playing chess, the captain looking up treasure on his map, an old Harpsichord playing the theme, and a huge amount of treasure being guarded by another skeleton pirate. The Aztec chest from Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl sits in the corner of the Treasure Room and is the last thing guests see before entering a dark tunnel

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pirates_of_the_Caribbean_%28theme_park_ride%29, accessed August 30, 2007).

The movie is a conventional blockbuster of the 21st century in that its slippery offshoots are numerous and varied: novel, junior novel, graphic novel, read-along audio novel, sheet music, soundtrack CD, posters (84 of them listed on amazon.com), replica necklace and flintlock pistol, video game, toys, and clothing. The aesthetic of unfinish manifests itself in this branding exercise that enables fans to experience the story over and over again – and in a final spasm of slipperiness, the ride has been altered to take account of events from the movies.

The slipperiness and unfinished qualities of media representations are evident also in the "art imitating life" aspect and movie lore associated with Johnny Depp's portrayal of Jack Sparrow. Depp noted in interviews after the release of the first movie that he had drawn inspiration for his character by playing him as a drunken Keith Richards. For the third movie in this franchise, Keith Richards was cast to play Jack Sparrow's father, a sly reference that moves across the fictional boundary separating the world of the story from

the world of the actors. After the announcement of Richards' appearance in the movie, a cover story in *Rolling Stone* explored the relationship between the two men and its consequences for the movie (Wild, 2007), another example of slippery mutation between different discourses.

Figure 1 gives some indication of the complexity of this particular slippery fiction. Pirate stories abound in print literature: *Treasure Island* (Stevenson, 1883) set the ball rolling in the nineteenth century and its popularity is reflected in its impact on such classic children's novels as *Peter Pan and Wendy* (Barrie, 1911) and *Swallows and Amazons* (Ransome, 1930) as well as in its movie reflections in the work of Errol Flynn and others. In more contemporary times, *The Princess Bride* (Goldman, 1973) offers one kind of ironic testimony to the power of the pirate story. *Pirate's Passage*, William Gilkerson's more serious epic novel of pirate escapades won Canada's Governor General's Award for 2006. Published between instalments of the movie trilogy, it provided a kind of echo-chamber to the films. The movies provide visual background to a reading of the book; the book offers historical insight in which to ground the nonsense of the films.

Like many blockbuster movies, *Pirates of the Caribbean* also has tentacles in the world of popular culture. Actors Johnny Depp and Orlando Bloom bring the aura of other famous roles and of their off-screen personae into the three films of this particular franchise.
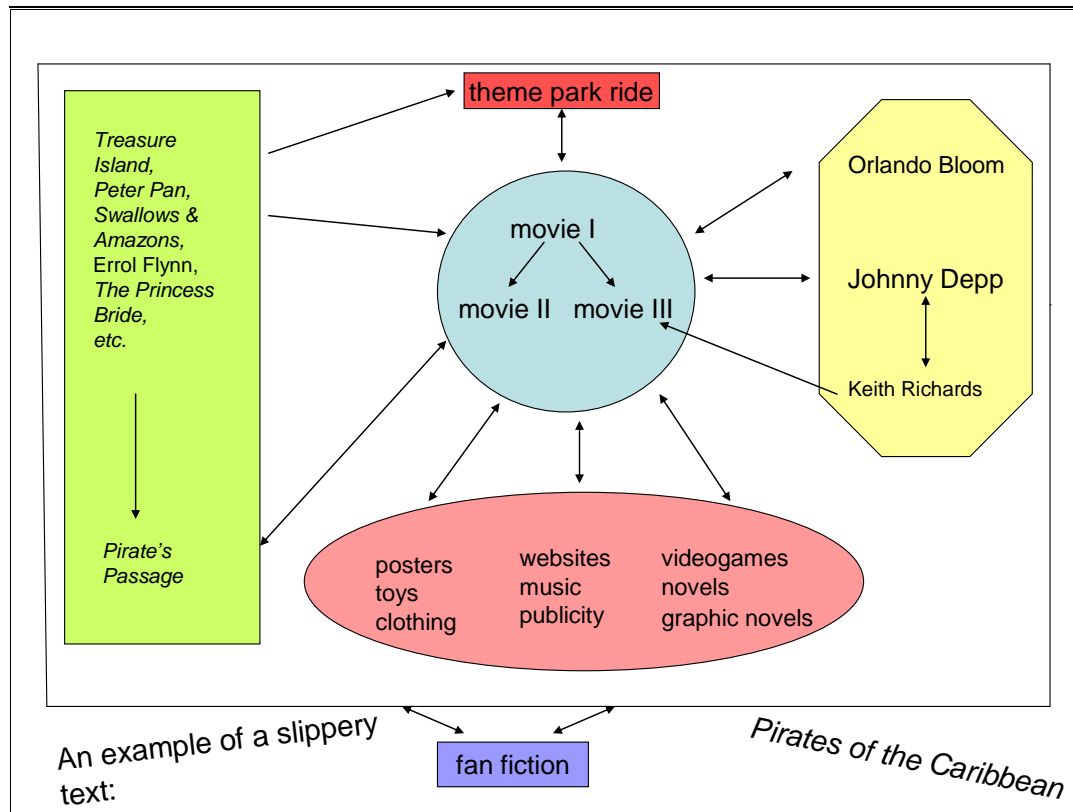
Figure 1

Fan versions

The story of *Pirates of the Caribbean* also lives in extended and varied ways on fan websites and fan retellings. Fan fiction writers draw from the original work of fiction, but, as do all writers, they also draw from the broader fictional universe of the genre. *Pirates'* genre forebears are the many popular pirate treatments in literature and film, as well as the conventions that feature in the theme park ride.

Such fan writing, involving specifics of plot and generalities of genre is not new. David Brewer (2005) notes that an "imaginative expansion" occurred in the early 18th century, characterised by readers' "increasing ability to imagine themselves part of a virtual community" (p. 26). Readers could imagine books to be "installments from a

larger *fictional* reality: what I would like to term 'the fictional archive'" (2005, p.26).

These readers created their own sequels and spin-offs based on published work such as

Gulliver's Travels in ways that are very similar to today's fan fiction; many of these fan

versions were published in magazines and books.

The Internet, as so often, applies a magnifying effect to an old phenomenon. On

March 9, 2007, there were 11,490 fan fictions of *Pirates of the Caribbean (PoTC)* posted

on www.fanfiction.net, which is only one of many popular fan fiction sites on the

Internet. Two days later, on March 11, 2007, there were 11,518 *Pirates* stories, an

increase of 28 stories in a two-day period of PoTC inactivity in the press. Similarly, later

in the year, in a 19-day period from December 2 to December 21, 2007, the site grew by

135 stories, from 15,125 to 15,260 stories posted. The archive of fan fiction expands at an

astonishing rate.   Aficionados of particular fan fictions interlink extensively among fan

fiction sites, web sites devoted to specific interests, livejournal pages, and other Internet

neighborhoods in a multitude of affinity group communities (Gee, 2004).

One popular fan fiction author, ErinRua, has posted many PoTC stories. She sums

up a fan fiction writer's appreciation: "When a movie or book is just too good to let end,

the eternal underground of fan fiction writers steps into the breach and continues the

adventures that so captivated us" (www.blackpearltales.net). As is clear from the opening

of one of ErinRua's PoTC stories, *The African Star,* some fan fiction is sharp and lively,

and shows fine control of the genre:

> The little ketch *Antoinette* fled like a panicked sparrow, but there was no
>
> escaping the dark ship that strode in her wake. The hunter had appeared from the
>
> morning mist like a tall grey phantom and the *Antoinette*'s captain and crew

looked back in very fear. On she came like a gathering storm, her black hull

knifing the waves beneath sails dark as storm clouds. Even while they watched,

white spume burst thundering against the black ship's bow, for her tall press of

canvas drove her as the ketch's lesser sails could not. Then a different white cloud

blossomed at the hunter's fore, followed an instant later by a thumping boom - and

a sharp splash off the *Antoinette*'s starboard quarter

(http://www.fanfiction.net/s/1541759/1/, accessed March 10, 2007).

In her use of the word "sparrow" in the opening line (a reference to Johnny

Depp's character, Jack Sparrow), ErinRua "shouts-out" an allusion to *PoTC* that fans of

the movie would recognise. A shout-out hails the outside world from within the fiction,

drawing on and speaking to fans' broader understanding of the story. Fans understand

the insider's reference, a reminder that Rabinowitz' rule of signification may work as a

kind of community builder in fan fiction.

ErinRua notes the varying intentions of fan fiction writers:

I do know that many fan fiction writers genuinely endeavor to hone their craft to

the very best of their ability. They engage friends as "beta readers" to proof-read

and critique their work, they invite constructive criticism, and they actively work

to improve their writing. Thus, I see "value" in fan fiction because it offers an

open venue for writers, and it does so with a ready audience. I also think the most

positive benefit of fan fiction is that it excludes no one (personal correspondence,

March 12, 2007).

The response that ErinRua mentions is plentiful. *The African Star* alone has 444

reviews posted (as of December 21, 2007). While many of the reviews of fan fiction are

not much more than gushing praise, some, such as Runciman, actually provide specific

and potentially useful feedback for authors:

> Runciman: Great job! You obviously did your homework. I loved the many little
>
> details, like the implication that Sparrow once worked for the Crown as a
>
> privateer, or Roisin's Gaelic war cry (my father is from Eire). I liked how the
>
> supernatural elements are mostly hinted at rather than spelled out (I much prefer
>
> the first trailer of 'Dead Man's Chest', where you hear Davy Jones but don't
>
> actually see him). Finally, it took some nerve to bring a glimpse of harsh reality
>
> into PoTC's fantasy world. It's sad to recall that slavery lingered on in America
>
> until 1865 . . ., and that real captives on slave ships knew nobody was coming to
>
> rescue them (http://www.fanfiction.net/r/1541759/0/1/ , accessed March 19,
>
> 2007).

Normative aspects: Policing the poachers

The publishing industry has always had an authoritative, gatekeeping function in

literacy. The Internet appears to bypass the gatekeeping function of publishers altogether;

fan fiction, for example, appears to be a free-for-all where anyone can post or respond.

But forms of gatekeeping and assertion of authority are evident on fan fiction sites,

negotiated by the community itself. Fan fiction communities often engage in what appear

to be "community policing" practices. In this section, we discuss some of the

implications of this regulation.

Much of the response to fan fiction takes the form of constructive criticism. Not

all fan fiction is created equal; some of it (perhaps much of it), is pretty terrible by almost

anyone's standards, and true fans of a particular fiction feel the pain of poorly written but well intentioned fan fiction. However, outright flaming—the screeching capital-lettered red pen of disapproval—is not accepted. The etiquette of fan fiction allows and encourages "concrit"—constructive criticism. For serious fan fiction writers, as ErinRua attests, the concrit is a strong incentive for posting writing.

Other responses, however, may be seen as less constructive and more authoritarian. We will discuss common forms of community policing in fan fiction—Mary Sue litmus tests, and the Protectors of the Plot Continuum—and then look at a more official version of such admonishments in the rules developed for the Penguin-sponsored wiki novel. What are the implications of such police work on contributors' understanding of writing and interpreting?

Mary Sue litmus tests. Fan fiction communities have developed a clever nose for a particular kind of weak writing. A Mary Sue (or, the male equivalent, Marty Stu, who goes by several names) is a character who is a bit too obviously a stand-in for an author eager to immerse herself or himself in a favourite fictional universe and to interact, perhaps romantically, with the characters of that universe:

> **Mary Sue** (sometimes shortened simply to **Sue**) is a pejorative term for a [fictional character](#) who is portrayed in an overly idealized way and lacks noteworthy flaws, or has unreasonably romanticized flaws. Characters labeled *Mary Sues*, as well as the stories they appear in, are generally seen as wish-fulfillment fantasies of the author (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Sue_fanfiction , accessed March 13, 2007).

Lest an author unsuspectingly create a Mary Sue or Marty Stu, a number of helpful "litmus tests" appear online. Melissa "Merlin Missy" Wilson's "The (Original) Mary Sue Litmus Test" (http://missy.reimer.com/library/marysuefaq.html) offers a withering set of questions by which authors can determine (before submitting their works to a larger, and presumably, equally savvy audience) whether they have inadvertently created a Mary Sue or Marty Stu. The first question is "Is the character named after you?" and the test proceeds to disallow any possible excuse for such a practice. The popularity of the original MarySue litmus test has spawned many adaptations, prompting Melissa Wilson to offer a primer on writing a litmus test for a particular fandom. In this primer, her first "dos and don'ts" note reminds writers of the importance of proper attribution for her original work:

> DON'T copy my test word for word and only change the names. If you're doing that, you're not adding anything to the test, and doing it was pointless. Also, it's plagiarism, and plagiarism makes Dr. Merlin cranky
> (http://missy.reimer.com/library/marysuefaq.html , accessed March 12, 2007).

The community's recognition that Mary Sues are mere parodies of more rounded, three-dimensional characters provides a way for it to exert some pro-active gatekeeping functions and enforcement of quality-control standards. The self-policing encouraged by the author of a litmus test offers a checklist primer on character development and authorial fantasies. It also, perhaps, respects the primal urge that causes authors to create some fiction, while discouraging authors from foisting their more self-indulgent fantasies on wider audiences. Self-indulgence has always served as a genuine motivation for writing. What the Mary Sue tests establish is the tolerance threshold of *readers*, who

may be considerably less enchanted than the author at her insertion into a canonical story. Yet the naming and shaming of Mary Sue fiction has an authoritarian aspect to it, a topic to which we shall return later.

     Protectors of the Plot Continuum. Another form of community policing in fan fiction is the more activist approach known as the Protectors of the Plot Continuum (PPC). The PPC establishes a voluntary virtual brigade of agents who "correct" perceived problems in fan fiction by entering the fiction and fixing the violation from *within* the fictional structure. Led by intrepid agents Jay and Acacia, the Protectors of the Plot Continuum agents work tirelessly to rid the fictional universe of Mary Sues and other inappropriate problems and offenses in fan fiction (http://www.geocities.com/thequendi/chargelist.html , accessed August 30, 2007). The list of potential offences is lengthy, categorized into such areas as canon violations, space-time distortions, technical improbabilities, language abuses, and subjective charges. The PPC operates with many departments and rules. Potential agents may be drawn to methods favoured by particular departments; for example, agents of the Department of Geographical Aberrations like to set fires to do away with geographical inconsistencies and compressions (e.g., non-canon locations and incorrect distances between locations) (http://www.freewebs.com/bonsaimallorn/ , accessed August 30, 2007).   A sense of the intricacy of the endeavour can be gleaned by a glance at one subcategory of possible plot continuum charges for *The Lord of the Rings*. There are 12 charges listed for character disruptions alone, including:

     1.1. Causing personality alterations and character ruptures

     1.2. Causing improbable romantic liaisons between canon characters (e.g.

Gandalf/Galadriel)

1.3. Breaking up a canon romance, especially in favour of an original character

1.4. Causing a character to act like a lovestruck fool, especially over an original

character

1.5. Causing male characters to be misogynistic or chauvinistic; creating

"Designated Misogynistic Bastards"

1.6. Causing female characters to be antagonistically feminist

1.7. Creating gratuitous uncanonical younger siblings or offspring of canon

characters (http://www.geocities.com/thequendi/chargelist.html , accessed August

30, 2007).

The establishment of the enormously intricate organization of the Protectors of the Plot Continuum affords fan fiction community members opportunities to be playful and clever with fictional structures. Like fan fiction itself, the PPC also affords opportunities for self-indulgence, in a community-sanctioned environment. The authority and standards of a virtual community can thus be enforced within the guise of a free-wheeling enterprise.

PenguinWiki. Recently, Penguin Books initiated an online space for collaborative writing (http://www.amillionpenguins.com , accessed March 13, 2007). Writers were invited to contribute to "an experiment in creativity and community" by writing a collaborative novel:

Can a collective create a believable fictional voice? How does a plot find any sort of coherent trajectory when different people have a different idea about how a story should end – or even begin? And, perhaps most importantly, can writers

really leave their egos at the door?

(http://www.amillionpenguins.com/wiki/index.php/About , accessed March 13, 2007)

The site has clear guidelines for ethical participation in this experiment, including admonitions on politeness, tolerance, consideration of others, and respect for copyrighted material. The ethical guidelines may challenge even the most public-spirited of contributors to reach for greater heights of tolerance:

> Remember that contributors to the wikinovel may come from different cultures and countries and might express different views or perspectives—be respectful of these differences. Including the idea that other people may not be respectful of differences. Be respectful of disrespect, except inasmuch as you cannot be, in your difference
>
> (http://www.amillionpenguins.com/wiki/index.php/Ethical_guidelines , accessed March 13, 2007)

The PenguinWiki is an interesting blend of traditional and newer literacy practices as this well-established publishing house wades into the waters of a contemporary online ethos that values open access and participation but still wants to work within specified limits.

Policing and politics

Penguin chose to institutionalise some of the regulatory framework of fan fiction writing and publishing. Others prefer to challenge this framework. As in most authoritative structures, opportunities abound for highly opinionated and perhaps overly assertive people to bully meeker writers within virtual environments using such devices

as Mary Sue litmus tests and PPC agents. Chander and Sunder (2007) would make a stronger argument that such regulation attempts to shut down political spaces that may be opened up by fan fiction. In their analysis, Mary Sues have the potential to challenge media agendas on many questions including gender, race and class.

> "Mary Sue" is often a pejorative expression, used to deride fan fiction perceived as narcissistic. We dissent from this view. In this essay, we rehabilitate Mary Sue as a figure of subaltern critique and, indeed, empowerment. . . . As exemplified by Lieutenant Mary Sue, this figure serves to contest popular media stereotypes of certain groups such as women, gays, and racial minorities. Where the popular media might show such groups as lacking agency or exhibiting other negative characteristics, Mary Sues are powerful, beautiful, and intrepid (599).

Chander and Sunder ascribe a role to Mary Sue that is both heroic and educational:

> Media stereotypes play an important role in educating us about the capacities of others. More sinister yet, they play an important role in educating us about our own capacities. Given a popular media that marginalizes various segments of society, the act of reworking popular stories to assert one's own value is empowering (626).

Using new media in the classroom

Many young people are familiar with the ways in which conventions shift to take account of the developments described here. However, such forms of metanarrative awareness are very often not valued in the classroom. Many teachers fail to take full advantage of the sophistication of their students when it comes to evaluating the purpose

and achievement of different kinds of fan fiction. They frequently overlook an important resource for learning about how authors compose fiction, how writers comment on that fiction in an impressive variety of oblique ways, and how readers develop communities of interpretation. Students who move easily in this complex territory may well feel that it is the literary approaches of their English classroom that seem unsophisticated in comparison; such attitudes undermine the opportunity to explore and develop critical perspectives.

Using fan fiction as a teaching resource offers an opportunity to help young writers and readers articulate some of their tacit understandings and subject them to critical scrutiny. In some cases it provides a lens for reconsidering the original source material; in others, it supplies a view of reader response that also holds teaching potential.

Henry Jenkins and his colleagues urge educators to attend to the challenges of teaching young people about the power of media to shape their perceptions of the world. They identify three major concerns that educators need to consider regarding new media contexts: the participation gap, the transparency problem, and the ethics challenge (Jenkins *et al.*, n.d., 3).

The participation gap. Often discussed as "the digital divide," this gap refers to the inequality of digital access for young people. They need to have opportunities to develop the skills and knowledge that will enable them to participate fully in the world. We note that not all people will want to write fan fiction, but they ought to have a sense of what it can offer in terms of community and enjoyment. As ErinRua explained:

> People who otherwise might never pick up a pen, who have no urge whatsoever to
> write for "conventional" publication, often find a whole new creative freedom in

fan fiction….Fan fiction…opens whole worlds of community and creativity that

its participants would otherwise never have (personal correspondence, March 12,

2007).

The transparency problem. Jenkins notes "the challenges young people face in

learning to see clearly the ways that media shape perceptions of the world" (p3). New

and seemingly "subversive" media are no less powerful in shaping perceptions of the

world than are older media. Some may argue, in fact, that new media can be *more*

powerful because they pretend to subvert dominant power structures. Fan fiction flies

under the radar in terms of young people's perception of their engagement with media.

The apparent democracy of opinion and opportunity in fan fiction masks the community

policing structures that are already in place and the structures yet to be developed as fan

fiction continues to gain popularity. The extent to which traditional media, such as

publishing houses, participate and influence online publication will be interesting to track

as writing experiments like or unlike the PenguinWiki develop. Educators must help

young people to understand media constructions and influences as they develop; to do so,

educators need to be aware of and participate in such environments.

The ethics challenge. Jenkins categorises as an ethics gap "the breakdown of

traditional forms of professional training and socialization that might prepare young

people for their increasingly public roles as media makers and community participants"

(p3). His reminder of the ethical aspects of participation in media environments is timely

and important. The socialization of participants in online environments calls for

educators' scrutiny and imaginative engagement. The creation of online communities

involves all the traditional ethical issues of community and social participation, with

intriguing aspects particular to specific environments. (See Dibbell, 1998, for an insider's discussion of the intricacies, dilemmas, and contradictions of participation in an online community.)

Some classroom possibilities for using fan fiction

In recent years, we have worked with graduate and undergraduate students to explore fan fiction and some pedagogical possibilities for its inclusion in literacy classrooms. As preservice and experienced teachers write and read stories based on our favourite fictional worlds, our discussions have led to productive ideas for working with fan fiction with young people.

As teachers, we note the large preponderance of posted stories and episodes that are inappropriate to bring into classrooms; many fan fiction communities seem to revel in transgressions of the canonical work in characterisation, plot or tone, developing stories that feature explicit sexual behaviour and profanity. It is necessary, then, if teachers wish to encourage social networking through fan fiction, that they create their own fan sites, using district or school web sites that provide some control of postings. Within district sites, however, it is possible to create fan fiction communities that will encourage social networking and response to fiction written by writers unknown to the readers.

In spite of the need for caution, teachers can easily provide fan fiction models that are appropriate for use in classrooms with children. There are many posted fictions of *Harry Potter,* for example, and other popular and engaging films, books and television shows. Fan fiction is not only found on fanfiction.net; popular fiction includes successful commercial adaptations that can be considered fan fiction, too. Teachers will need to

foster explicit discussions of the parameters of acceptable writing, negotiating within reason the degree to which plot, characterisation, and tone of the original fictional universe should be adhered to. Adolescents' natural inclination to push boundaries will inevitably spark their desire to push limits if the teacher is not pro-active, but teachers have the benefit in fan fiction of arguing that when a canonical work is "PG-rated," then so too should be the fan fiction. As the popularity of MarySue tests, Protectors of the Plot Continuum, and other such community policing activities demonstrates, the conversation about what is acceptable re-mixing of canonical fiction is highly engaging in itself for many fan fiction writers. Such conversations should certainly be part of the classroom ethos when students write fan fiction: the young people who engage in this discussion now are among the arbiters of literary conventions of the coming years.

Teachers can also support students by allowing a fair degree of choice with some guidance for variations of style of presentation. In our classes, some students found it easier and more enjoyable to writing in prose, while others wrote more comfortably in script form. Again, such choices lead to useful and important discussions about the potential and challenges of each form of representation of narrative and characterization. Teachers who ensure that students are familiar with the conventions of varied ways of telling stories help students develop broader repertoires.

Students must be allowed choice in which fictional worlds they focus on. As we began to write our own fan fictions, we were surprised to learn how difficult it is to write competent fan fictions. A writer must know the fictional world very well. Even the class members who initially felt that writing fan fiction would not be as "creative" as making up a fictional world oneself were quite taken aback by how difficult they found writing

within a known fictional world. When young writers choose a well loved fiction, they can "bootstrap" their writing skills by working in more sophisticated fictional structures and characters than they could otherwise create on their own. Like parody, fan fiction can provide scaffolding of narrative forms and conventions for young writers.

Conclusions

The questions we raise here are important to teachers and also to teacher educators, who need to prepare beginning teachers to meet the demands and opportunities of the contemporary literacy world so that their students will find some congruence between their recreational literacy practices and the literacy practices promoted in their schools. This work affords teacher educators and literacy researchers ways of making connections between traditional and newer literacy forms and formats. Such structural analytics as the scheme laid out by Rabinowitz (1987) on the rules of reading offer the potential to create bridges between the old and the new.

At a more theoretical level, understanding the conventions that underlie the creation of successful fan fiction also makes a general contribution to a critical awareness of the contemporary culture of "unfinish," and a better understanding of writing and reading behaviours within this culture. If teachers are to develop such critical awareness among the students in their charge, they need to take account of the larger universe of fictional reception and production within which many of their students move at will.

References

Barrie, J. (1911) *Peter Pan and Wendy*. New York: C.N. Potter

Brewer, D.A. (2005). *The Afterlife of Character, 1726-1825*. Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press

Chander, A. & M. Sunder. (2007) 'Everyone's A Superhero: A Cultural Theory of 'Mary Sue" Fan Fiction as Fair Use.' *California Law Review,* Vol. 95, pp. 597-626

de Certeau, M. (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. S. Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dibbell, J. (1998). *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.

ErinRua. www.blackpearltales.net, accessed March 11, 2007

ErinRua. http://www.fanfiction.net/s/1541759/1/ , accessed March 11, 2007

ErinRua. (2007, March 12) Personal communication

Fleckenstein, K.S. (2003) *Embodied Literacies: Imageword and a Poetics of Teaching*. Studies in Writing & Rhetoric. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press

Gee, J. P. (2004). *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling*. London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Goldman, W. (1973) *The Princess Bride*. New York: Harcourt Brace

Jenkins, H. (1992) *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge

Jenkins, H. et.al. (n.d.) 'Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century.' An Occasional Paper on Digital Media and Learning. MacArthur Foundation

http://www.digitallearning.macfound.org/site/c.enJLKQNlFiG/b.2108773/apps/nl

/content2.asp?content_id={CD911571-0240-4714-A93B-1D0C07C7B6C1}&notoc=1, accessed March 19, 2007

Lunenfeld, P. (2000/1999) 'Unfinished Business.' In Lunenfeld, P. (ed.) *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 7-22

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl. (2003) Prod. Jerry Bruckheimer. Dir. Gore Verbenski. DVD. Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment

Rabinowitz, P.J. (1987) *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press

Ransome, A. (1930) *Swallows and Amazons*. London: Cape

Stevenson, R.L. (1883) *Treasure Island*. London: Cassell

Wild, D. (2007, May 31) "Johnny Depp & Keith Richards: *Pirates of the Caribbean*'s Blood Brothers." *Rolling Stone 1027*, http://www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/johnny_depp__keith_richards_ipirates_of_the_caribbeanis_blood_brothers, accessed September 7, 2007

Wolf, S.A. & S.B. Heath. (1992) *The Braid of Literature: Children's Worlds of Reading*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press