

Whither Fanfic?

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One of the recurring themes of this column is the extent to which computers and the networks that connect them are transforming—or failing to transform—aspects of everyday life. As a magazine editor, I’m especially interested in the IT-driven evolution of media.

In one sense, most media have changed little since the advent of the Internet, social media, and smart phones. The next James Bond movie won’t be qualitatively different from the first, *Doctor No*, of 1962. Margaret Atwood’s latest novel, *Hag-Seed*, first appeared as a 320-page hardback in 2017. Her debut, *The Edible Woman*, first appeared as a 281-page hardback in 1969.

But when it comes to distribution and consumption, IT surely has transformed media. We watch TV shows on phones. We order ebooks online. We receive news headlines via Twitter. Still, those media are essentially the same as they ever were. What media, if any, have truly changed?

Fan fiction—fanfic for short—has perhaps undergone the most dramatic, IT-driven change. Short stories about the characters of the original series of *Star Trek* were among the medium’s first examples. Besides expressing their love of the show, fanfic authors were motivated to sustain the show’s fictional universe. The original series was cancelled in 1969 after just three seasons. Trekkies had to wait 10 years for the first movie; 18 for *Star Trek: Next Generation*.

Those early fanfics were distributed at conventions as cheaply printed fanzines. Starting in the 1980s, fanfics were shared on Usenet. Since the late 1990s, they have been shared on web-based archives, the largest of which, FanFiction.net, has 10 million registered users.

Thanks to those electronic channels, fanfics have proliferated in variety and number. As of June, the repository Archive of Our Own (AO3) held 40,647 stories that feature the character Hermione Granger from Harry Potter. Out of curiosity, I searched AO3 for stories based on *Blake’s 7*, a science fiction series that ran on BBC1 in 1978–81. I found 2,671.

What more could IT do for fanfic? Once authors have finished a story, they can post it to AO3, where it can be found, read, and reviewed by thousands, even millions. The system is already efficient. The next fanfic frontier, I predict, will be in computer animation.

With Source Filmmaker and other tools, you can create original animations based on characters who appear in video games. The process is laborious. Synching lip movements to audio is especially hard. But eventually those challenges will be solved. And fans of *Star Trek* will be able to create their own episodes, whether they have the originality of Gene Roddenberry or not.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles Day is *Physics Today*’s editor in chief. The views in this column are his own and not necessarily those of either *Physics Today* or its publisher, the American Institute of Physics.