The Advantages of Fan Fiction As an Art Form
A Shameless Essay/Jane Mortimer

[Note: One of the finest essays we've read online about the writing of fanfiction. Posted here with the kind permission of the author.]
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This essay will address the question from the point of view of the artist: why should a writer create a fan fiction piece, rather than one of the many other paying venues he or she might turn to? The simple, and wrong, answer would be: because they're not good enough to write pro work. But since I know quite a number of professional authors -- people who write novels, short stories, and scripts for a living -- who also write occasional fan fiction for the sheer joy of it, and would write more if they had time, this argument doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Most of these professional authors are a bit quiet about what they do for love; in the world as we know it, one of the most dangerous things a person can do is admit to taking great pains over something not done for money. For writers especially, the spectre of Samuel Johnson's adage still haunts and stings; and the argument of the first psychoanalysts still holds true: if we don't charge you a fee, you won't value what we do.

But let's begin chronologically.

Once upon a time, people told stories for love as well as for money (just as they do today). Achilles died before the gates of Troy ten thousand times over, as older brothers told the tale to younger ones, parents to children; and Camelot rose and fell again every sunset. People and stories. It was the same scene in tribal gatherings, in cramped peasants' huts, in the hall of Henry II.

Which is to say, there was no television.

And every time a story was told by a new voice, there was a slightly different spin on it. Ovid's gods and goddesses played the same games they had always played, but this time their dance through the familiar landscape seemed a bit more petty than it had been. Lancelot met Guinivere for the first time, and the meeting was comic, or tragic, or resentful, or admiring; it foreshadowed what was to come, it gave no hint as to what was to come. Merlin was wise; Merlin was foolish. The characters passed through the distinctive voices of thousands of people, each of whom took the tale inside themselves, loved it, and passed it on with new insights, new subtleties.

Storytelling is practically embedded in the human genetic code. Recent psychological theories suggest that it may be a way of honing our social skills; we are creatures meant to live in groups, and communicating with and understanding the people around us, building relationships with them, is necessary for our survival. Whatever the reason, anyone who's

seen a child playing with a toy soldier, or a twelve million dollar movie, knows the impulse is a powerful one.

And once this impulse expressed itself as a tapestry of different shades; the same characters appeared in varying guises all over a continent, part of one giant, beloved work of folk art.

To this day, it still happens. It's just that now we call it fan fiction.

Only recently have our distinctions grown up between who can entertain and who cannot -- who has the right, if you will. Why should a friend play the guitar for you, when you can touch a button and get Segovia? Why should a friend tell you a story, when you can touch another button and get the product of a highly paid staff of writers?

(Of course, as anyone who's spent more than fifteen minutes in front of a television will agree, the fact that something was produced by a highly paid staff of writers is no guarantee of its quality.)

If a writer is brazen enough to choose a form of expression ungated by editors or producers, one that is essentially self-publishing, it is a bold step. What would prompt someone to take it? Because this art form, at least on the Net, is ungated, it takes on a new and refreshing democracy; unfortunately, it also results in a tsunami of stories, the majority of which are not up to professional standards. But quality usually shines through on the Net, perhaps more consistently than in professional publishing, where a good book may languish unregarded and die without ever making a ripple. There is a real Darwinian process at work in this new Net folk art -- you don't have to schmooze with a producer or get an editor's attention; all you have to do is put a story in an archive. It will be read, and word of mouth is the only advertising the Net has. If you have reached your audience in terms of story, you will reach them in terms of being pointed out and read. There is an upper one percent of fan fiction that easily matches genre fiction in terms of quality, and the discerning reader knows where to find it.

Still, it is a brave move, to self-publish; and not for money, either. So why?

Every literary form has its advantages. First person, for instance, confers enormous narrative power, and allows character to present itself as voice in every word of a book; it ties plot together structurally by giving a clear storyline (just follow the protagonist). On the other hand, third person allows for sweep of narrative and quick cuts between point of view; a complex plot with a number of locations is so much more easily served by third person.

The series, as an art form, has certain advantages. (I must interject here that I'm not saying the series form is better than any other. Experience tells me that this is the point where critics leap in and try to explain to me why it's not better, and I'd like to save them the

trouble.) A film has narrative advantage over a book in that a cut to one image may convey two pages of descriptive information; a book has narrative advantage over a film in that it grounds the reader deep in point-of-view, allowing you right inside a character's head. Neither is "better," in my opinion.

The advantages of the series form are several, but chief among them are baseline and character, two related values.

Characters that have come to life for people, who are recognized on an intimate level, are quite often series products: Sherlock Holmes, Parker's Spenser, Kinsey Milhone, Lord Peter Wimsey, Miles Vorkosigan. I'm talking about a recognition factor that goes beyond the usual: if you tried to make Holmes a suave playboy, for instance, the average guy on the street would say, "But Sherlock Holmes would never do that," as certain that he knows Holmes as that he knows his pals at work. There is a power of image and an intimacy of knowledge that comes with the top rung of series characters. People know Holmes's London flat better than the apartment they lived in 12 years ago: and I certainly remember 221B Baker Street better than the three-digit street number of my dwelling in the last city I lived in. (Or was it a four-digit number?)

Bujold readers will gossip about what nice girls Lady Vorkosigan might set up Miles with, as though he were someone they knew in high school. Sayers fans have opinions on Charles' marriage to Peter's sister, on the young Gerald, on whether Harriet made Peter wait too long. And here, you see, is the key; people don't discuss characters like this as though they were literary creations. They discuss them as though they were real, as though they had independent existence in some alternate reality. Their adventures, in some cases, may be larger than life; but they have achieved a certain autonomy in the mind. It is a glowing tribute to the author that quite often their name isn't even mentioned when news breaks of a "new Miles Vorkosigan book," a "Sherlock Holmes story," a "Lord Peter Wimsey novel." (After all, why should the author's name be mentioned? They have achieved godhood -- their character lives and breathes.)

There is a familiarity, an intimacy of knowledge, an affection, that seeps into the bones of the readers over time, like a silent radiation. This is not an intellectual knowledge. It cannot be matched by giving them a quick rundown of some new character's life, then throwing them into the middle of it and expecting them to be affected in the same way.

And because this knowledge is there, the reader (or watcher) has a baseline to work from. Even on a sitcom, there are moments when someone will say something to a main character and the audience will as one go, "Oooooooh." Because they know how he'll respond to that. It's a knowledge that doesn't have to be re-taught from scratch in the first 20 minutes of every episode; once the character is established, it's taken for granted. Which leaves those 20 minutes (in television, time is the most precious thing you have) free to explore new things.

Television was made for small-scale characterization. There's a saying in film, that first you have to spend ten minutes showing the villain kicking a dog and the good guy helping a cat out of a tree. No need for the upfront investment of time in television; the character is already known, and therefore, this week, we will shine one sharp beam of light on this aspect of his mind and heart. Perhaps we'll twist that baseline around a bit on you; perhaps we'll build it up even more. The form was designed for subtlety, for the momentary focus of intensity on two square inches. (Its capabilities often remain unexploited, but when they are taken advantage of, the results are memorable.)

And an intensity can be built along with the intimacy. For example, one of my favorite American scriptwriters, David Burke, wrote many of the great moments during the unparalleled first season of Wiseguy. Here was a story about a young Fed sent out to become friends with a Mafia businessman, and then betray him. For nine hours we watched as the characters' intimacy with each other, and with us, increased; we watched as morality became more and more muddled and identity more and more fluid. We were taken by the hand, gradually, until by the time the Mafia character viciously executed one of his rivals in the next-to-final episode, we were still on his side.

When, at the end of the arc, the hero stands above the dead body of his target, lost, and looks in the eyes of his bureau supervisor, he says simply, "I wish it was you."

I can't tell you the impact that sentence had at that moment. And every writer I've ever spoken to about it agrees -- that impact would not have been the same at the end of a two-hour movie. Oh, we would have been slightly shocked. We would felt for him. But that sense of having one's feet swept out from under would not have been there; because the intensity had been growing, without our even being aware of it, for nine hours. The sense of gathering lightening finally released was overwhelming.

This is the kind of thing that can be done by a series, at its best. The vast majority of television shows barely exploit their potential in this area. (Which is one reason fan writers hear the siren call: they see what could be done with a character, and oh, it is just so tempting to do it. There is no other explanation for the fact that some truly boring television shows have engendered some of the most thought-provoking fan fiction. One cannot always count on the guy the producer owed a favor to last year, who never watched the show before, to write a script that comes anywhere near acceptability -- let alone art. There are disadvantages to hiring people who write for money and not for love.)

(Another sidebar: There is some disagreement among literary folk as to what an author should write about. For most of us, it helps enormously to be interested in the subjects of our books and stories, though I gather there are a few souls on the fringes who prefer to implement technique on a purely intellectual basis. But for most, when a subject has caught

our fancy, it's like turning on the Muse faucet: we think about it, get ideas in the middle of the night, dialogue and scenes come to us from the blue, and in general we do our best work; and all the enthusiasm a good writer feels is transmitted to readers of similar tastes.

I know of at least one editor who includes fan authors in her pool of potential tie-in writers, no doubt for this very reason. The natural focus of a good writer is a powerful thing to have on your side. Others look for pros who enjoy a series and would get a kick out of writing for it.

On the other hand, there are those who take the opposite view; if you're interested in a project, if you'd love to do it, if all kinds of ideas are crowding into your mind, this is the very sign that you shouldn't be allowed near it. It should be given to a hack who produces tie-in books like a stack of pancakes, preferably one who's never seen the show he's asked to write about.

Because a professional hack turning out measured cups of sawdust -- well-structured, highly professional sawdust -- is at least in it for the money. He's respectable in a way that someone who writes for love is not. The incredibly mild enthusiasm of the readers seems to be irrelevant here; they will buy the book anyway, and if they don't enjoy it, the dollars have already been paid.)

But to return to our central thesis... Well, Jane, one may say, this is all very well; you're telling us the reasons a series form might appeal to a writer. But why fan fiction? Shouldn't everyone who's interested in writing series fiction (and not just as an exercise, but the very best writing of which they're capable) be packing up, heading out to Hollywood, and seeking work in television? Or staying home and starting their own string of detective novels?

First, bear this in mind with fan fiction: No one ever said you had to choose.

You can pack up, head out to Hollywood, and get a staff job. And you can still write fan fiction! I know people who've done it. Going to Hollywood may not fully satisfy your series cravings for a couple of reasons. For example, if your specialty is smartass dialogue and black humor, and you land a job on an earnestly straight, family-values show, that side of you will want to out somewhere. What's more, the strictures of Hollywood are among the most exacting in the world: Write an episode, but don't change anything. Write an episode, but don't offend anybody. Write an episode, but be totally controlled by a four-act structure with a fake line of progressively rising tension just before each commercial break.

(Producers are starting to tumble to the fact that killing a spear-carrier just before the first act break while scary music plays is no longer suspenseful to the audience, if it ever was; it's simply a clearly recognizable signal that they can head to the kitchen for a beer.)

Well, Jane, this may be true, but why can't the frustrated scriptwriter be working on a novel?

The answer is, ninety percent of them are. But novels too have their strictures; and fan fiction is uncircumscribed by marketing conventions of any kind. If you're reading this essay off my Web page, you'll note, for example, a story called The Hand We Were Dealt. This is a novelette using a suspense/detective framework to illuminate a troubled, erotic relationship between two men. About a third of the piece is erotic; all of it is character, as is the majority of fan fiction. I challenge you to find a mainstream publisher for this.

In short, fan fiction provides a free arena for experimentation with form in an almost pure state. The marketing department of Penguin is out of the picture. It's you, your vision, and your readers.

(And I pause to say again, Nobody forces you to choose. You can write professional novels and still write fan fiction -- I know plenty of writers who do. The usual metaphor is that while classical music pays the bills, it's a pleasure to slip out at night and play a few bars in a jazz club.)

All right, Jane (says the determined debater), so the Net is an opportunity to experiment. But why not write your own series on the Net, using your own characters?

First, this makes an unquestioned assumption -- that creating original characters is "better." This assumption is almost religious; it's not really something you can argue with. I've created original characters, and I've worked with pre-existing ones, and I find both delightful challenges. Some people, of course, can't write pre-existing characters; they can't listen to the rhythms of various strings of dialogue and pick it all up effortlessly, for instance. This lack, however, ought not translate into a value judgment. I can't write serious poetry (nor does serious poetry pay any better than fan fiction; in terms of perks and contacts, it probably offers less). But I'm not about to order poets to go out and write novels immediately, because novels are the only good. It reminds me of a Dilbert cartoon, in which each person sitting around a conference table offers a course of action that just happens to match their own expertise exactly. The last person to speak is a hedgehog who insists, "Quills! We must stick them with quills!"

Secondly -- god, what a lot of work that would be, creating a full series on the Net. I for one can't devote that many years of my life to non-paying copy, however much fun it might be.

Indeed, one of the points of experimentation in the fan fiction venue is that it's so easy. Excuse me if I stop for a moment here to examine something that will be obvious to many; but where a movie is similar in timing and structure to a longish short story, a series is similar to a novel. Long forms versus short forms. The analogy is by no means exact, but it will do for present purposes. Now, if we take a cross-section of a novel -- say, the part that comes between pages 365 and 400 -- and lay it out under a microscope beside a short story, we will find that they are totally different species.

A short story is designed for immediate impact. A novel is designed for the slow, cumulative effect of build-up over the long haul. This build-up is on a level that works way beneath the surface of a reader's mind. So that by the time the reader reaches a latter stage of a novel, they are ready to have their head played with in all kinds of new ways. It's here that a novel can (ostensibly) take a break from the primary storyline and lead us aside into some comfortably shaded arbor where we hear the music change, riffing off all that has gone before, rippling backward and altering some of it in retrospect. It's time for that subtle examination of the two-inch square of sunlight; it's time for the experience in the character's life that is not the message of the story, exactly, but a comment on that message that changes your understanding of it.

It is time, in short, to use that baseline, now firmly established, as a wall on which we can bounce all sorts of patterns -- and in fan fiction, it's just so damned easy to dare new things. For instance, suppose you're used to working in first person; now you'd like to try writing a third person narrative, but you want to make it in immediate, direct POV; and you'd like to use a situation that would arise from this character dynamic that intrigues you. And you don't feel like writing half a novel to set up the situation -- you want to go straight to the thing you're experimenting with.

You can take a character and (for instance) have him behave totally contrary to his beliefs, and to his usual dramatic arc as a character, in an almost heartbreaking way; you can establish the tragedy of it in nine pages or so; and you have the inexpressible benefit of plugging into a mighty, pre-existing engine -- that deep and intimate, knowledgeable connection that's built up over the course of perhaps years. All that baseline is already spoken for, already absorbed -- now you can riff off it in any pattern you like.

Even if you took six months out of your life to write this as a novel, in order to get exactly that power-effect of emotional knowledge -- to let the reader walk in the character's shoes, to grasp the process they've gone through -- you'd want to spend a goodly portion of time establishing the baseline you're longing to violate. (The audience's hearts and their expectations must be one; hence both their sense of shock, when intimate knowledge is finally contradicted, and their deeper understanding, if you can pull off what you're doing in character.) And after writing the part that doesn't interest you for 300 pages, you can tack on the portion at the end that does, thereby creating -- well, a pretty unwieldy structure for a novel.

In short, this particular experiment is well-served by precisely the fan fiction form. And then, within the course of the same month, you could do a short romantic comedy, an erotic piece, a brief story told entirely in dialogue, and any number of other games -- all without the need for set-up. You merely swoop down, like a programmer grabbing pre-existing code and then creating precisely the spin they want.

The learning period for all these things is incredibly telescoped, and you can return to your pro fiction with some wicked ideas. (I leave out the professional writers I know who've cut and stitched their experiments into money-making novels, filing off the serial numbers and smiling cryptically when asked where they get their ideas.)

Some people, of course, the majority, stick with fan fiction, and never write pro works. A great many of them would not be able to, and do you know, I don't think any the less of them for doing their best with a form that intrigues them. In fact, the open gate of the Net defines its enormous potential for folk art, to me, and I value the intricate pattern being created by thousands of "ordinary" people playing with the same canon.

And it is fascinating to watch: on one level, a return to widespread storytelling, an old-fashioned art; on another level, something quite new and different. Interactive fiction has to a preliminary extent opened up straight narrative to a branching story, but nothing like this. In the center we have the river of canon, aka "the show," a broad Mississippi rolling inexorably onward, pushed by money and Hollywood expertise. Off of it, we have a thousand tributaries, a thousand "what ifs," many of them branching off into yet further refinements of alternate reality as each writer examines what's gone before and spins off it. And no matter what violations of convention take place -- our heroes die, our heroes sleep together, our heroes go through irrevocable changes -- none of it affects the central river, which rolls on throwing out branches further downstream. Unlike the single-narrative circuit that runs through the alternatives of interactive fiction, all these possibilities are true. Finally narrative has its cake and eats it too. The talent and ability of the writers may vary wildly, but the shape of the overall creation is an amazing thing to watch evolve.

A friend of mine who likes to sniff the air for the passing zeitgeist remarked to me just the other day, in discussing the Burning Man festival:

"The no-spectators thing is part of what gives it its pull: it's a kind of rebellion against art/culture as something you consume, rather than something that you participate in building. The Nightline piece also noted the enormous appeal of building a community, even a temporary one, from scratch with almost no rules laid down in advance about how it's going to be. The more I think about this, the more I think that fanfic, Burning Man, and things like the Borderlands series-and-fandom all tap in to the movement back toward a more participatory, less hierarchical form of arts/entertainment culture, which I begin to suspect may be a more important movement for the next ten years or so than people have yet realized."

It's an exciting time to be on the Net. Art has never been more fluid or more disrespectful, or labored harder over by joyfully unpaid multitudes. It's reminiscent of a John Varley short story in which thousands of ordinary people in space try, on an individual basis, to paint Saturn's rings.

But where the participatory nature of the Net most surpasses interactive fiction, for me personally, is that it retains the "storytelling" nature of the exchange between author and audience. Because the audience participates here, yes, but the reader does not direct the flow of the story they are reading at that moment. As a matter of personal taste, I was never drawn to interactive fiction because I felt that losing that "found object" sense of a story was a lack. A story should be given to you, whole and unencumbered; a little bit of someone else's personal vision. My own vision, I already know about. (No slur is intended here against a form many people like; as I said, this is personal taste.)

Again, fan fiction gets to have it both ways. A traditional exchange, author-to-audience, and a larger participatory tapestry in which one is expected to lay one's own contribution, affected often by the stories around it.

But to return to our previous point: while many may not be, other fan writers are manifestly capable of going pro. A few are capable of going pro in an overwhelming way. But many of them don't. Why?

We have another unquestioned assumption here -- that going pro is "good." That these people should lay down a form that inspires them, for whatever reason, and start writing original novels, because we say so.

Well, but Jane, professional work pays. That's why they call it, you know, professional. And these people might reach an audience beyond the inbred world they're working in now.

Unfortunately, a lot of these top fan writers are pretty savvy about just what the pro market does pay, thank you very much. They've heard their pro friends beside them moan and bitch about a four thousand dollar advance on a novel that after expenses is closer to two thousand; about a market in which sales of three and four thousand copies is not unusual. Their fan Web pages are already showing up with hits in the thousands, and they're getting scores of pieces of fan mail -- from librarians, teachers, college professors, all of whom have paid close attention to the original source material, to other fan works, and to this fan work that they're writing about. These letter-writers are ready to show you that they did recognize the subtlety of what you were doing on page 22; to discuss your alternate interpretation of a character; to be, in short, the best, most responsive, most specific and most intelligent audience I've ever found in my life.

All this is seductive, and hard to turn away from for a few pieces of tossed silver and maybe five letters from strangers. Besides, these writers are drawn to what they're doing; why should they change to satisfy your notions of literary propriety? Life is short, and time is limited.

There was a time when "amateur" was a compliment. Pursuing something for love was admired, while doing it for filthy lucre was despised. We live in a harsher age, when values

have turned around, and if there's no immediate money from a project, writers are urged to abandon it. I find it reassuring to know the artistic impulse remains this strong, that people will still invest in something for sheer pleasure in its creation, and the hell with what the rest of the world may say.

Sometimes, you know, it is a world well lost.