

# UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

## SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

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**The Hidden Authors: A Study and Survey of Fan Fiction Writers**

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**Senior Honors Project**

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### **What is Fan fiction?**

Despite being a modern literary form for almost forty years, fan fiction is still mainly unknown and unrecognized by the majority of Americans. And no wonder; Media companies want as little attention as possible paid to these “deviants” who poach upon their licensed works and remake them simply for the joy of recognition by other fans. Such behavior is looked down upon strongly by polite society. Only the most unwashed, nerdy, pathologically obsessed fans who live in their parents’ basement could enjoy such an activity, or so the stereotype goes. Yet the evidence is clear that on the Internet, fan fiction, along with other fan activities, is becoming harder and harder to ignore. All works, whether they be movie, television shows, Japanese animation, books, or video games, are free for reinterpretation and reprocessing by fans unsatisfied with the original product or wanting more of the same after the original source has ended or has been cancelled.

Fan fiction is simply one offshoot of diverse activities that fans may participate in to acknowledge their devotion to their favorite series. They may produce pop songs with fan lyrics (called “filking”), music videos, novels, art, comics, essays, and sometimes their own coffee mugs. Yet all of this activity is non-profit. The lack of monetary exchanged may be caused by fear of the wrath of the “Powers That Be” (termed PTBs by fans, in reference to the corporations), or may be a non-monetary reciprocal relationship between fans, who may have nothing in common save for the adoration of a particular series. No attempt is made to claim the source material as their own, and fans are often particularly careful to add disclaimers of any ownership to their fan-works. However,

some fan fiction writers may try to “copyright” their own work, claiming it to be an original interpretation, and some become enraged when other “ficcers” (fan lingo for the authors themselves) produce a similar work to their own, yet there is little they can do other than to “flame” each other in a heated exchange on the Internet.

But generally, fan fiction writers are more polite than anything else. Their works are pieces of art offered as homage of the original source, written for each other and no wider audience. Sue Hazlett (2000), a scholar-fan, notes:

Fan fiction stories are written for a specific audience familiar with the conventions of fan fiction. The more knowledgeable the reader [is] in not only the conventions of fan fiction, but [also] the fictional universe in which it is created, the more pleasure the reader gets from fan fiction. For example, X-Files fan fiction may refer to events that take place in the "myth-arc" of the series. A person unfamiliar with the show would miss many of the details and insider humor present in these stories.

Thus if someone is not familiar with the original source material, they are often out of luck. The writers make hardly any effort to recap the original series. They simply assume that anyone who reads their work is already tremendously familiar with the source material. The writers/readers (the definitions blur strongly oftentimes, as readers can sometimes actively direct a story themselves) argue over minor details, such as the depth of certain relationships between characters, a logical continuation for the series after the source material ends, or ask “what if?” questions that detail an alternate version

of the story's universe. In general, they are extremely supportive of each other and any neophytes coming into the fold for the first time. A "virtual writing workshop atmosphere" (Bond and Michelson, 2003) is created by the fans; requests for beta readers (a fan-editor), series information, story recommendations and reviews orbit around the stories wherever they might be found.

Yet where did this phenomenon come from? Fan fiction (or "fanfic") is not necessarily a new invention. Since writing and reading are so closely intertwined, any writer is influenced by what he or she has read in his past. Fan fiction can be traced back to the oral traditions of heroes and myths and the wide latitude storytellers enjoyed in embellishing or altering the tales that they knew. Chaucer, Shakespeare, and the Romantic poets did much the same thing as fanfic authors do today, displaying an readers' knowledge of borrowed material and making in-jokes, poking jabs at contemporaries, and creating parodies that the rest of their audience, not having read the original material, would be left out on. Of course, in those pre-copyright days, the only thing that prevented direct plagiarism was the wrath of the original author. With the rise of copyrights and the novel idea of protecting intellectual property, fan fiction or its equivalents were discouraged and the growing consumer culture made it possible to simply discard old stories in favor of new ones as entertainment became produced *en masse*.

What can be termed modern fan fiction was created with the arrival of the science fiction drama *Star Trek* on television in 1966. The series was actually a commercial flop yet achieved cult status quickly. The first "fanzine," or fan magazine, was published in 1967 and featured stories based around the character of Spock (Hale 2001). This was not

determined to be infringement by the fans, since the magazine was priced “at cost” and the fan publisher made no profit. Similar creations were soon produced and kept up long after the TV show was cancelled in 1969. Soon after, *Star Trek* was syndicated for daytime television on weekdays, and the number of fans exploded as the original 69 episodes were shown again and again for years. This only fed the movement, and thus the much maligned *Star Trek* fandom was born. The first *Star Trek* convention was organized in 1975. Fanzines and fan fiction stories were traded and fans felt secure in their odd habit, as they had a community that held them together despite the discouragement from society at large. This was especially so for female fans of *Star Trek* who were pursuing an interest in male television shows. The number and content of fan fiction continued to grow with the fanzines, and soon most any TV show with a dedicated following had fanzines being published for fan consumption. However, the advent of Usenet and the Internet in the 1990s signaled a paradigm shift in the world of fan fiction and the “textual poachers” (Jenkins, 1992) who produced it. No longer would fan fiction be limited to a small amount of fanzine publishers; now any writer could publish his or her own material on the Internet for others with only a computer and a modem.

With the Internet, geographical and financial concerns were no longer a roadblock to producing fan fiction. Fan communities that were limited to their immediate geographic area were now allowed to access to each other with ease through email, message boards, newsgroups, chat rooms, and web sites. With fan-editors and publishers taken out of the picture, any fan with the desire could now produce fan fiction on a computer and post it however many times he or she wished on the Internet. While the quantity of fan-produced stories increased, the relative quality took a complete nosedive.

The fan-writing community was diluted by younger, more casual fans, who did not undergo the slow welcoming process described in Bacon-Smith's Enterprising Women. Before the advent of the Internet, she writes:

Initiation through conventions takes place in stages, at any one of which the participant may stop, not passing on to more esoteric levels of the community. For me, the first phase took two years. Depending on the enthusiasm of the newcomer, this process can move more or less quickly, but community members... seem to agree that two years is a reasonable length of time to develop a working knowledge of the forms and social life of the community (81).

Thus, the sheer number of the stories on the Internet cannot be taken as the culmination of communities' joint efforts because the Internet has disrupted the old system of slow welcome and integration. The intimacy once present and described in Textual Poachers and Enterprising Women has been lessened by the remote contact of the computer. Simultaneously, the computer makes it extremely easy for new fans to find material and join the ranks. Thus the fans mirrored the trajectory of the stories they were writing; while the quality dipped (according to older fans), the quantity has blossomed.

Also disrupted by the Internet was the old social hierarchy in fandom, dependant on local clubs and organized conventions that forced social interaction in order to participate in the different aspects of fandom, such as fan art and fan fiction. In his book Textual Poachers, Jenkins (1992) reports:

Fan reception cannot and does not exist in isolation, but is always shaped through input from other fans and motivated, at least partially, by a desire for further interaction with a larger social and cultural community (76).

The Internet and the modern computer as shattered this interaction model as well. A fan could now watch the shows, read fan fiction, peruse fan art, and produce his or her own material without the slightest human contact. This is not to say that every fan is now a hermit with a computer. But a contemporary fan who is interested in the material does not *have* to participate in the shared social culture of the fandom at large. Most still do, however, and fan communication and sharing of materials is now more widespread than ever.

A fan hierarchy is still in place, yet the process of “members” entering, leaving and advancing has been speeded up. In the abstract communication medium of the Internet, previous boundaries of age, class, and gender shifted to become more inclusive than in the fanzine era. Younger participants, males, and students are now breaking into a culture that was previously maintained by middle-class white females, more likely to be in their twenties rather than teens. In the medium the Internet, the mentors might be 14 year olds while the apprentices could be college students discovering fan fiction for the first time (Jenkins, 2003).

Other rankings are evident in fan message boards, story groups, and webmasters, echoing partially the fanzine editors and publishers of years past. Only now, group moderators, prolific and esteemed authors, and anyone who manages fan content beyond their own could dominate the higher ranks of the status hierarchy. As in any hierarchy,

there is friction, as some websites and fan editors, seeking to maintain quality among fellow fans, have adopted screening methods to preserve story quality and in some cases, squash disagreeable interpretations (such as “slash,” which is seen as offensive by some fan editors; see number 11 on the list on page 11).

Despite the opinions fans have of their own works, the legal status of fan fiction lacks precedent and is a gray area of copyright law, although most agree that if fan fiction had its day in court, it would lose the case. Because there is little incentive to sue, however, litigation of fan fiction is rare. Brad Templeton (2002), an advocate for free speech on the Internet, explains fan fiction’s nebulous relation to U.S. copyright law:

U.S. Copyright law is quite explicit that the making of what are called "derivative works" -- works based or derived from another copyrighted work -- the exclusive province of the owner of the original work. This is true even though the making of these new works is a highly creative process. If you write a story using settings or characters from somebody else's work, you need that author's permission.

This means that almost all "fan fiction" is arguably a copyright violation. If you want to write a story about Jim Kirk and Mr. Spock, you need Paramount's permission, plain and simple....

There is a major exception -- criticism and parody. The “fair use” provision says that if you want to make fun of something like *Star Trek*, you don't need their permission to include Mr. Spock. This is not a loophole; you can't just take a non-parody and claim it is one on a technicality. The way "fair use" works is you get sued for copyright infringement, and you admit you did copy, but that your

copying was a fair use. A subjective judgment on, among other things, your goals, is then made.

It's also worth noting that a court has never ruled on this issue, because fan fiction cases always get settled quickly when the defendant is a fan of limited means being sued by a powerful publishing company.

Thus the most it takes to deter a phantom's desire for written material is often a cease and desist order and/or a strongly worded statement from the original creator or copyright holder. Such mistreatment (as viewed by fans) leaves fans feeling betrayed and most abandon the series fandom for another series or television show that is more tolerant of fan fiction. One famous incident occurred with the author Anne Rice crushing a growing and popular fanfic community centered on her Vampire Chronicle novels. Rice (2000), backed by a team of lawyers, sent numerous cease and desist orders to webmasters and a strongly worded statement on her website:

I do not allow fan fiction. The characters are copyrighted. It upsets me terribly to even think about fan fiction with my characters. I advise my readers to write your own original stories with your own characters. It is absolutely essential that you respect my wishes.

However, despite her efforts, a quick Google search today reveals fan fiction based on her characters still in existence on the Internet.

## **The Many Forms of Fanfic**

There are many interpretations possible for any series, as the original writers themselves frequently use their text as a platform to point out social ills, or make wry commentary on human behavior, or provide a strong symbolic theme that educates as well as entertains. But a fan approaching the series text does so with a sense of reverence; it is common among fans of any series to refer to the original source as "canon." Canon is the author's will; if it is generally accepted as canon within the fan community, then that material, such as the characterizations, the setting, and the plot must be incorporated into the fan work in order to be considered fan fiction. Fan fiction must have at least one of these identifying series elements. If a fan writer merely takes the names of the characters and inserts them in an otherwise original work, then that the majority of the fan community cannot consider the work fan fiction. Sue Hazlett (2001) describes the fan publishing process:

Becoming a fan writer is not simply a matter of writing a story and putting it up on a web page. In order for a story to be circulated among other fans, it must go on a site that specializes in fan fiction. This means that one or more people read and evaluate the story before it is allowed to be posted. Most sites have strict rules as to what can or cannot be posted, and have these available as "FAQs" (frequently-asked questions) for potential writers. Many authors have "beta-readers" who read the story and point out errors in grammar or inconsistencies in plots before stories are submitted. In order to pass muster and be "published" on a

major fan fiction site, stories must be original, well-written and show a familiarity with the show and its characters.

The following categories do not lump fan fiction into neatly divided segments, as a fan work may have a mixture of categories within itself. However, Henry Jenkins (1992), a noted cultural studies scholar, does well in describing these eleven essentials in Textual Poachers, as all fan fiction still falls into one or more of these categories. They are:

1. Recontextualization, where fans fill in perceived gaps in the series timeline with scenes not provided in the original
2. Expanded Timelines, where the series has prequels or sequels added to it
3. Refocalization, where secondary characters take the place of the protagonist
4. Moral Realignment, where the villains become protagonists and/or the hero becomes the antagonist
5. Genre Shifting, where another genre model takes the place of the old one
6. Cross Overs, where different series are merged into one text,
7. Character Dislocation, where the setting changes but the characters stay the same,
8. Personalization, where the fan author “self-inserts” themselves in the series or brings them to the real world,
9. Emotional Intensification, or Angst, which focuses on the series’ characters in tragic circumstances,

10. Eroticisation, where fans provide an erotic element to their series that network censors and the general public would never allow,
11. Slash, a type of fan fiction for women, by women, taking the original homosocial bonds between a series' characters (such as Kirk and Spock) and replacing it with a homosexual bond. Slash is intriguing because the reasons for this fan category are complex and not readily apparent, and its legitimacy is the center of much debate within fan writing circles.

When these categories are kept in mind, explanations for the question, "Why do some people write certain fan fiction?" become apparent. Fan fiction itself is mainly a form of play in a comfortable setting. Most fan fiction stories are centered on science fiction/fantasy genres or any drama series with strong characters; historically, the main fandoms have been for television shows or movies such as *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Doctor Who*, *Blake's 7*, *Starsky and Hutch*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *Twin Peaks*, and the *X-files*.

Jenkins wrote that the original series "meta-text" must capture the imagination yet fail to satisfy, and in this perceived void the fan writer comes forward to add their own creative input to the series, playing but at the same time making a statement of what they would like to see in the series. Above all, Jenkins maintains, organized fans are critics, steadfast in their devotion yet often feeling the same exasperation a mother feels with a reticent child (Jenkins 1992). Episodes or scenes must conform to fans' expectations, who have an idealized version the series in mind. Inconsistencies, illogical behavior of characters, and unexplained events are rationalized by fan extrapolations and speculations

(Jenkins 1992, 100). These perspectives are vital for a fan to explore the “universe” the creator has presented, and explains why fans pay attention to every niggling detail with the narrative; in order to maintain a bond with the imaginary world, that world must have “credibility and coherence (Jenkins 1992, 108).” Hills (2002) comments further on the matter:

The hyperdigetic world may, as Jenkins notes, reward re-reading due to its richness and depth, but its role is, I would suggest, also one of stimulating creative speculation and providing a trusted environment for affective play. Particular genres or modes may be best suited to the maintenance of play...The predominance of science fiction, horror, fantasy, comedy and camp texts with cult forms is far from accidental (138).

### **Why Write Fan fiction?**

Play is the reason why the devotees undertake the arduous task of fanfic writing, producing stories with no hope of reward for quality of effort, condemned by copyright holders, and ignored by mainstream society. However, the fan response of why they write fan fiction muddles the question, as fans report they write for fun, yet also for fulfillment, the satisfaction in resolving the story, the practice in their own writing careers, the challenge of it, or for their friends. Less obvious answers are included the content of the stories themselves; some contain original characters modeled on the fan

author (called “Mary Sue” stories) who are inserted in the series to laugh, love and die with the series characters. The other disputed genre of slash obviously touches on non-mainstream topics of male eroticisation, gender role-play, and ambiguity of relationships. However, it is unfair to focus on slash simply because it so interesting and mistakenly create the impression that slash constitutes a large role in fan fiction. The vast majority of fan fiction has no slash at all.

With so many aspects, the question of why this activity is pursued is difficult to answer in a satisfactory manner. Obviously, fans who read and write fan fiction reap most of the same rewards “normal” reading and writing evoke. Fan fiction evokes different responses, however, because the audience has already been primed to receive the work, regardless of its quality. Also, the work is only comprehensible by other fans of that series. Fan works are not commodities, because on the Internet, a fan author only wishes to contribute to the fan-text worlds in a meaningful way (for this reason, redundancy in fan fiction is kept at a minimum; oftentimes when an author copies another author it is accidental).

Hills suggests the reason soap opera fans participate in the imaginary world is to “manage tensions between inner and outer worlds,” that is, the inner world of the fan and the external imaginary world of the cult series (Hills, 2002). Hills goes on to suggest that fans are not “escaping” reality or have trouble telling fantasy and reality apart; instead, they simply use media texts as a play-space between the two worlds. Fans often note that the characters in the series speak out to them, as if addressing them personally; oftentimes, they have a strong emphatic bond with one or more characters. However, the fan has trouble logically attaching such strong emotions to a fictional character. This

leads to Jenkin's claim that characters to fans are "both real and constructed," allowing the fan to maintain some ironic distance and objectivity over their obsession (Jenkins, 1992). Sue Hazlett speculates "this duality, the ability to both embrace the texts and simultaneously view them from an objective perspective, may be a precondition for the motive to appropriate and rewrite the texts (Hazlett, 2001)."

The rewriting process is easier than writing in the mainstream publishing industry because fellow fans are willing to offer feedback at any step in the fan author's process of creation (Jenkins 1992, 158). Considering the fan fiction community's willingness to accept new, inexperienced members above all else, even inept writers are greeted with affirmation and encouragement to keep writing (which may be interpreted as self-interest; after all, the reader-fan is getting a product for free). The general atmosphere of goodwill is the core aspect of why fans write and keep writing. When they are putting forth their work, they are met online with fellow fans offering advice, support, and friendship.

### **Harry Potter Fan Fiction**

Many categories dominate the Mecca of fan fiction websites, <http://www.fanfiction.net>, yet there is an undisputed king among categories. The category is for the *Harry Potter* books, which count the number of individual stories on this one site at 125,000 and still climbing, as the series shows no signs of diminishing in popularity. Of all fan fiction series, *Harry Potter* is no doubt the unquestioned leader. Several reasons may exist for this unusual popularity, for *Harry Potter* fan fiction now outstrips fandoms that have been in existence for decades, such as *Star Trek* and *Star*

*Wars*. The most obvious reason is the behemoth marketing machine drummed up by Scholastic, Bloomsbury, and Warner, as well as the books' unprecedented run on the New York Times' bestseller list (prompting a new, separate list for children's books in the periodical). The amount of money spent in marketing *Harry Potter* through the books, movies, and merchandise easily totals in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Yet the books themselves must touch some chord within readers to spark the imagination. Matt Hills notes that every series must have qualities that allow it to attain cult status and a cult following. Andrew Blake suggests that "if we are going to understand why Harry Potter has become a global hero we have to see Harry Potter him in his times – namely, 1997 and beyond (108)."

Blake and others search for why is successful in general, in the face of scathing attacks by critics. There are the obvious cultural factors; the character Harry Potter is English, and because of the dominance and legacy of the British Empire, *Harry Potter* has had a far-reaching impact worldwide (Blake 2001). Other factors include Harry's humanistic faith in good, the modern generation's penchant for the nostalgic values of a few years ago (and thus identification with *Harry Potter*, a children's book), and the controversy caused by Harry's practice of magic, all of which increased sales as Harry became a steadfast icon of good in our times. But other factors worked in the series favor for adoption as fan fiction. Nothing is special about the stories themselves; any similar cult text could have taken the place of *Harry Potter* as the dominant fandom online. It is simply *Harry Potter* had the good fortune to have many factors that favored both mainstream popularity and adaptability for fan fiction.

*Harry Potter* is the first book series to fully inherit the advantage of the Internet, the first four books being published in rapid succession from 1996-2000 during the period of explosive Internet growth. Thus since his arrival on American shores in 1997, Harry Potter has been a boy of the Internet age. Amazon.com, the online book dealer, has started flourishing in no small part to the might of *Harry Potter* (BBC 2003). In fact, according to experts worldwide, Harry Potter has been credited for a renewed interest in reading in children.

A second factor is the series' genre, simple escapist fantasy with a complex world as a backdrop. This is very important for the series to be viable for fan fiction. Matt Hills (2002) says:

The cult [of fans]...typically focuses its endlessly deferred narrative around a singular question or related set of questions. This "endlessly deferred narrative" lends the cult programme...its encapsulated identity...

Another defining attribute of cult text is hyperdigesis: the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension...

This overarching intricacy of the cult narrative typically displays such a coherence and continuity that it can be trusted by the viewer, presenting the grounds for "ontological security," issues of fan trust being central to the creation and maintenance of the cult. If one considers the fan as "playing" with the cult object then one reason for such a concern with continuity becomes apparent. The

fan-viewer treats the hyperdigetic world as a space through which the management of identity can be undertaken...Breaches in continuity threaten the security of the viewer-text relationship. (134-138)

Fan fiction leans heavily upon the science fiction and fantasy genres because these worlds are removed from the mundane and allow the fan writer to take the helm in the creator's unexplored regions of their universe. The endlessly deferred narrative allows the plot to meander around, concentrate on details, and put off the inevitable conclusion of Harry defeating the evil Lord Voldemort once and for all, thus (presumably) ending the series. The "hyperdigesis" is what many science-fiction and fantasy authors term world building, the creation of a world/universe with consistent rules and details. By extrapolating what they know from the *Harry Potter* books, any fan with knowledge of Latin (all spells in *Harry Potter* are in Latin) and a taste for mythology can create their own magic and magical creatures within Harry's fantasy world. At *Harry Potter* fan fiction websites, essays and FAQs (frequently asked questions) about magical folklore await those interested in adding their own creative flair to the series.

The third and arguably most contributing factor is the vast cast of named characters J.K. Rowling has created in the *Harry Potter* series. While some have complained that the plethora of characters can make the series too dizzying for children (and for the author as well, critics attest), many readers are pleased by the complex character dynamics and can often cite favorite characters. This aspect marks many of the more popular fan fiction series. One of a fan writer's joys comes from the imaginative

and sometimes playful romantic pairings that can be created, often justified on some flimsy subtext from the original story. What is unusual, however, is that *Harry Potter* has taken this desire for character relationships and popularized the general language and subculture of fan fiction through this aspect. Preferred relationships are referred to as “SHIPs,” as fans take sides against one another in arguing the merits of a Harry/Hermione relationship versus a Ron/Hermione relationship. Some fan writers pursue this passion to such an extreme that by the time Harry and his classmates are out of school at 18 years of age, every named character in the series is in a couple. Other fans cheerfully put the characters into implausible (and sometimes morally questionable) matches, as Harry develops a bond with the misanthropic professor Severus Snape or awkwardly falls in love with his hated rival, Draco Malfoy.

However, these fixations on relationships between the characters are limited when a book remains merely that, a book. With only cover illustrations for a visual basis, most people fail to make the strong attachments to a character or a set of characters that are necessary for the devotion that is fan fiction writing. Yet when the *Harry Potter* movies arrived in theatres, people now had the visual imagery necessary to supplement the novels. Indeed, interest in the movies sparked another run of sales for all four of Rowling’s books out at the time (BBC 2001). The series became even more popular and for many people, the characters were now “real” as they had a readily available actor in costume ready to assume the roles of their favorite characters. The popularity of the character Severus Snape among female fan writers, a character described in the books as “a thin man with sallow skin, a hooked nose, and greasy...black hair (Rowling 78),” may

be due mainly to Alan Rickman and his ability to give Snape redeeming qualities, such as a silky baritone.

Visual media is key for fan fiction; nearly every major fan series is television based or movie based. The reason for this may be that a book is a difficult, time consuming experience to share, while visual media may be watched as many times as the fans wish, and in a group. Another may be the way television and movies immerse the spectator and draw them into the narrative, and this immersion shortens the distance between the reader and the same narrative in book format. When the *Harry Potter* movies provided a visual basis for the books, previously casual readers became fans as a connection to human faces, as opposed to abstract imagery or drawings, became possible. Marshall McLuhan may have been right when he claimed television does not leave much to the imagination, yet this old model of television and movies being purely passive activities is almost reversed completely regarding the mainly female fan fiction writers, who track details of their shows and movies the same way male football fans keep track of their favorite sports teams, even in the off-season.

Thus armed with movie images, *Harry Potter* fan writers have entered a period of exponential growth. As had happened with the original popularity of the books, a word-of-mouth snowball effect was occurring, as fans on the Internet languished between the period of the fourth and fifth books, from the summer of 2000 to the summer of 2003. Desperate to fulfill their own desire for last three books in the series, fans soon outpaced J. K. Rowling in production, some losing interest halfway through and others finishing the 7<sup>th</sup> and last book in the series before Rowling had finished the 5<sup>th</sup>. Journalists took notice and produced articles detailing the more shocking aspects of Harry Potter fan

fiction, such as slash and *Harry Potter* erotica (Boston Globe, 2002). AOL Time-Warner noticed as well, and started a ham-fisted campaign to round up websites from their biggest fans, teens who were promoting their product for free and probably better than they could have done themselves. The website <http://www.registrar.com> noted these actions, saying in an article, “Since the purpose of fan sites is promotion, it seems particularly silly of Warner to decide against harnessing the enthusiasm (2000).”

Fans have mixed feelings over the copyright holders and original author. Some will brook no ill will to the creator of their beloved characters, while others have come to vehemently disagree with Rowling’s 5<sup>th</sup> installment of the series (due largely to the death of one of the more popular characters). One teenage author flatly states that “the 5<sup>th</sup> book did not happen” and has stubbornly continued to write stories concerning the character despite the canon of the author. A few others have given up on their stories, depressed and disappointed in the 5<sup>th</sup> book to fulfill their expectations. Others have a live and let live attitude with Warner, the producer of the wildly successful movies, while others have taken up arms against Warner’s interest in keeping *Harry Potter* erotica and slash undercover. Fan writer Jubilee3 sums up the mixed fan reaction over slash in the *Harry Potter* books:

That’s right. Naive little me thought that slash was a synonym for diss [slang for disrespect]. Boy, was I in for a shock. At first, I was confused. What were Harry and Draco doing? Huh? Then, I was appalled. What kind of sick freak would write about children’s characters doing that? Next, I moved on to curiosity. Seriously, what could possibly be the appeal? I just didn’t understand what drove

people to write about that. But, well, curiosity led to interest after I discovered some of the more talented writers, and that inevitably ended up as full-on obsession. It didn't help matters that there's no end of the number of talented authors that can be found all over the place at any given time. It's like reading a favorite book series over and over again from all possible, different angles. It's fascinating to see what different people do with the same general outline and how they use individual subtexts. Just, wow (personal correspondence, 2004).

### **The Survey**

Among the crown jewels of *Harry Potter* fan fiction are the 100,000 word and beyond epics (100,000 words translates roughly to 250 written pages). Fanfiction.net records over 550 of these stories, meaning from the 5 source books more than 500 novels have been generated on one site. The multicultural nature of *Harry Potter* is shown on the site as well, because *Harry Potter* fan fiction has the largest number of fanfics in a language other than English. The level of commitment and dedication required to produce such a product is astonishing, and I was drawn to these stories, wondering what type of person produces these massive creative works.

The survey is intended to be a starting point for anyone interested in researching the question of *who* writes fan fiction? Obviously, the data is expected to be different across websites, genres, and fandoms; however, this data has potential commercial value for a non-commercial and technically illegal endeavor. The Nielson Web Rankings consistently finds that <http://www.fanfiction.net> as one of the “stickiest” web sites,

meaning that people who come to this site spend a great deal of time on this one site (which is not surprising; the reading of fan fiction takes time).

Thus I decided to attempt to graph the demographic of these dedicated fan fiction writers, yet there was no general fan fiction population with which to compare them. I decided then to do two surveys; one that would have a random sampling of all significant fan fiction genres, while the other would be only *Harry Potter* works, all works being at least 80,000 words long. Of the first sample, 69 out of 132 emails responded, while 66 out of 120 responded in the exclusive *Harry Potter* sample.

I sent out copies of the same message in individual emails to increase the chances for successful contact (mass emails from unknown email addresses are often regarded as spam). Questions such as income and time spent on the Internet were considered and then discarded as being too sensitive, and I eventually settled on asking questions of age, ethnicity, gender, occupation, location, marital status, and education level. In the email I made an effort to establish trust by pointing out my own fan fiction efforts and approaching the subject as a fellow fan.

I am comparing my data against that of Camille Bacon-Smith, an ethnographer who had studied *Star Trek* fanfic writers from 1982-1987 and had estimated the gender of fan fiction writers to be 90% female, overwhelmingly white and middle-class, and most likely to be in their 20s and 30s (Bacon-Smith 1988). Henry Jenkins, in his later 1992 book on fan fiction, echoed Bacon-Smith's findings. I hypothesized that due to the Internet popularizing fan fiction, more males, teens, and other ethnicities have included themselves in the fan fiction population.

The data slightly supports my hypothesis. I was surprised to see that fan fiction still remains mostly female, although an increase in males is evident (Chart 1). This may be due to the anime (Japanese animation) and video game categories of fan fiction, those source materials still being traditionally dominated by males. The female population for the *Harry Potter* books is slightly more, but this could be due to the female author or the fact teen books (such as the *Nancy Drew* or *Artemis Fowl* series) are more popular among girls.

The age brackets (Chart 2) display a slight increase among teens for the *Harry Potter* books. For both categories the population below 30 marks the majority, indicating that fan fiction may be something that people do “grow out of.” A good question is where are all the fans Bacon-Smith and Henry Jenkins once described? Have they not participated in fan fiction on the Internet? Are they so old-fashioned that they still crank out fanzines instead of publishing on the Internet? Clearly, some fans eventually lose interest and give up their obsessions as they grow older.

The ethnicity among the fan fiction writers is mostly Caucasian (Chart 3), yet this may be more an indicator of the socio-economic status of the average Internet user. It should be noted that this question meant little to most foreign country respondents (many were confused by the question; no U.S. resident was). However, the mere existence of other ethnicities engaging in fan fiction marks a shift of fan fiction becoming more inclusive, perhaps due to the Internet, where identification by race is impossible. The education level of the fans (Chart 4) is rather unremarkable; again, the high population of students in college may be due to the fact that fan fiction writers are likely to be Internet users, thus making it a marker of economic bearing.

The fact that most of the respondents are students in high school or college comes as little surprise, since most are in their teens or early 20s. The slight job differences (Chart 5), such as the drop of jobs in the business category for *Harry Potter* writers, may be because of the younger average population or slightly larger female population. The same reasoning applies to the fact that most fan fiction writers appear to be single (Chart 6). The numbers are similar for both *Harry Potter* and fan fiction in general.

The location response (Chart 7) was intriguing. In the general fan fiction population, higher numbers than expected came up for the Southern U.S. and Australia/Oceania. Considering Australia's total population of 20 million, the numbers might be a part of an usually large fan fiction and/or Internet using population. *Harry Potter* shows its international prowess in a much larger European population percentage at the expense of parts of the U.S. population as compared to general fan fiction users. This may be due to the British flavor of the novels, or the (mostly) U.S. concerns over Satanism and magic in *Harry Potter*. Generally, other European countries besides the United Kingdom seem to find *Harry Potter* accessible, more so than fan fiction at large. Of course, this is probably due to the fact that English is spoken or is likely to have English speakers in these locations.

The survey went well for its purpose. Because of the obvious problems associated with such a methodology, such as respondent honesty, the inability to verify any information, the fact that only works in English were considered, the lack of a pre-existing population to study, and the fact that this seems to be one of the first studies of its kind, I was less concerned with having a rigorous, air-tight study than generating interest and a response. Also, my previous experience as a fan and fan writer myself

makes me ill-suited for an objective ethnographic approach to fan fiction, yet my familiarity with the process allows me insights that are unavailable to outsiders. Jenkins, Hills, and Bacon-Smith admit in their books to being scholar-fans as well; Matt Hills discusses extensively the problems posed to academics investigating anything related to their fandoms in Fan Cultures.

### Conclusion

For Henry Jenkins, fan fiction writers are “poachers,” who struggle against media stereotypes and unfair treatment to heroically reclaim their cultural icons from corporations. For Camille Bacon-Smith, the women-writers are feminist victims, banding together for strength and using Spock and Kirk as vehicles to navigate their own difficult lives. In my opinion, they capture only facets of the treasure that is fan fiction. Above all, fan writers write for the joy of it and the benefits they reap from this activity. They contribute to a sharing culture that offers its works for free, try to find solace in other, meet equally passionate fans, and improve their writing and language skills. In many, they have discovered an author within themselves; while few would claim they have a talent for writing, most would agree that through fan fiction, they have discovered a passion that had laid buried somewhere inside themselves.

Yet many would not have discovered this spark had it not been for the Internet. Sue Hazlett (2000) explains how much the Internet has changed things for fan fiction:

...[T]he [I]nternet has had profound implications on fandom. Fans use the [I]nternet to form online communities, and the conventions and expectations of these communities also transform the meanings that each fan derives from the texts and the form in which these meanings are expressed. In addition, these communities form a subculture which borrows the characters and symbols of a popular program and transform them into something meaningful to the members of that community. In a sense, it is not the stories in and of themselves that are important, but the focus they provide for the writers in that community to communicate the issues that are important in their lives to other readers and writers in that community.

Ernie Bond and Nancy Michelson agree that the *Harry Potter* novels are tied to the Internet and fan fiction:

...the advent of Harry Potter has generated an unprecedented number of voluntary literary responses by adolescent readers. These young authors have been able to co-construct a web of meaning-making as they find a wide audience for their writings, facilitated by the increasing accessibility of the Internet...

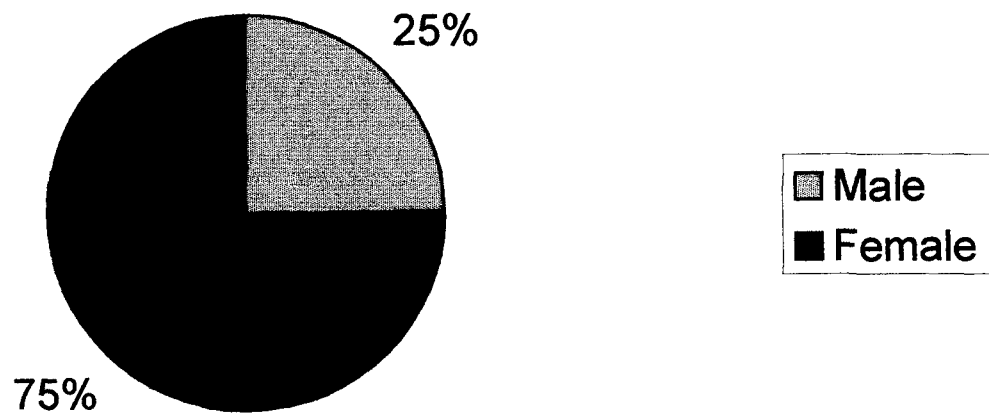
Their work signifies a breakdown of the borders that, as adults, many of us have accepted as natural (111,113).

These borders are not obvious and are breaking them is against the law, yet the image of young fan fiction authors pressing against them is a rousing alternative to Neil

Postman's apocalyptic vision of the utterly passive and thoughtless television viewer described in Are We Amusing Ourselves to Death? The answer to Neil Postman's question might be found with these young "poachers," happily reading, writing, and editing in their own worlds, oblivious to societies' persistent searching for a way to make literary education fun and entertaining.

Chart 1

### Fanfiction Pop. Gender



### Harry Potter Pop. Gender

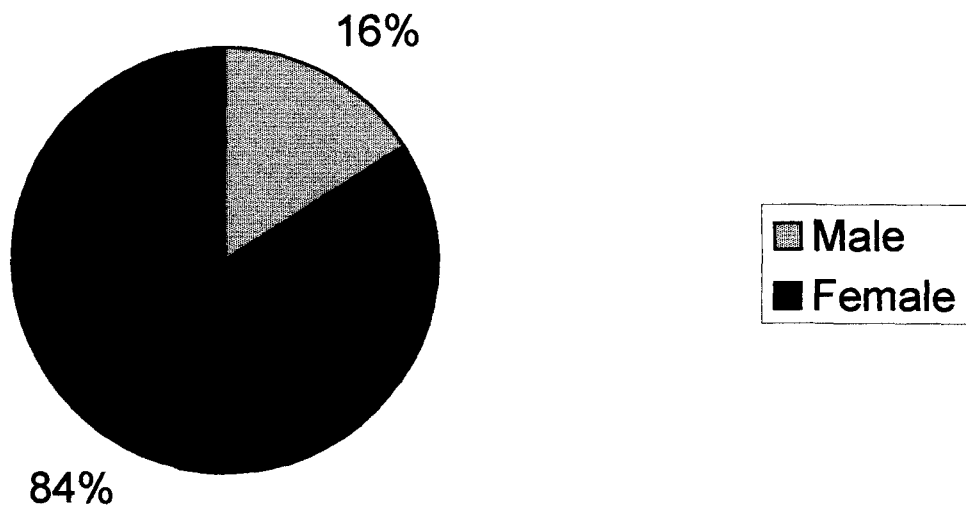
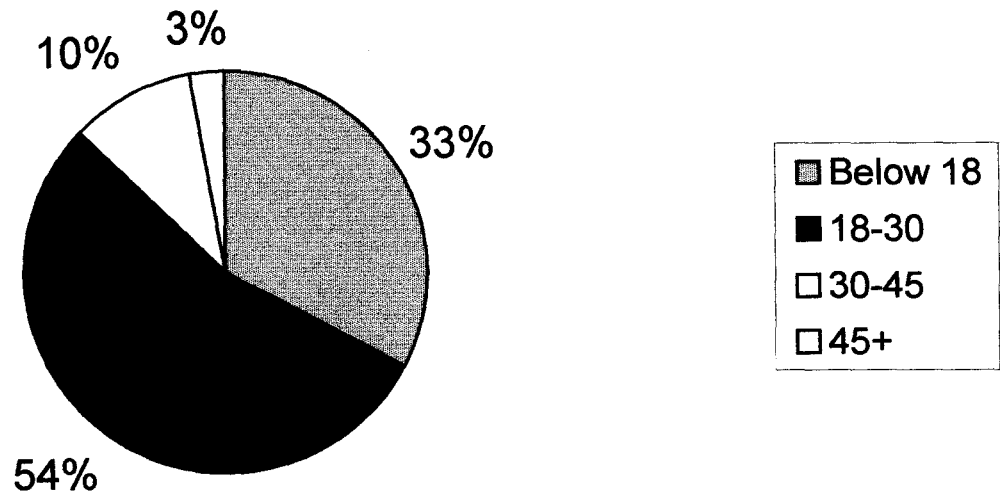


Chart 2

### Fanfiction Pop. Age



### Harry Potter Pop. Age

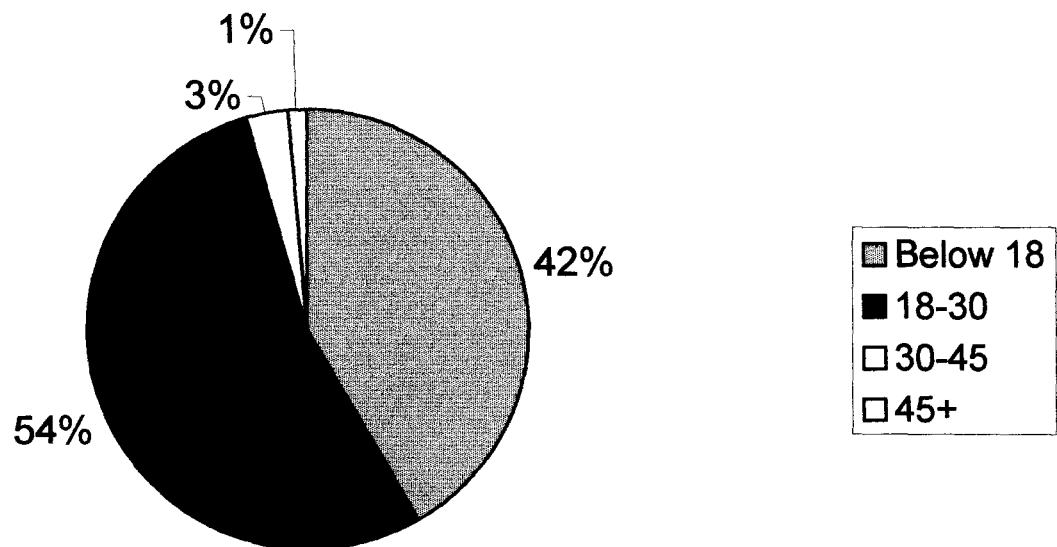
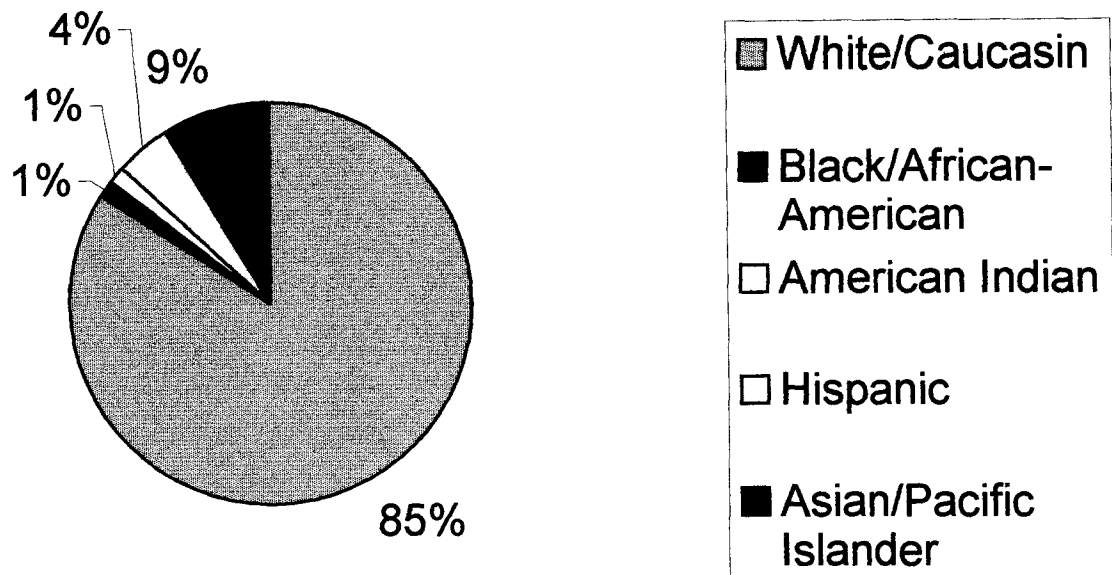


Chart 3

### Fanfiction Pop. Ethnicity



### Harry Potter Pop. Ethnicity

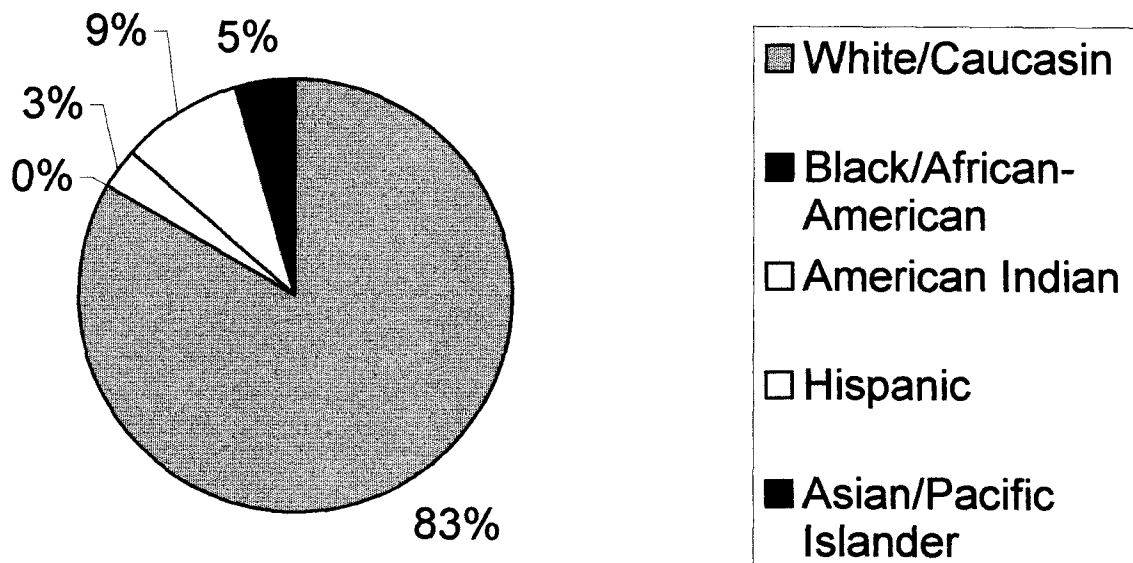
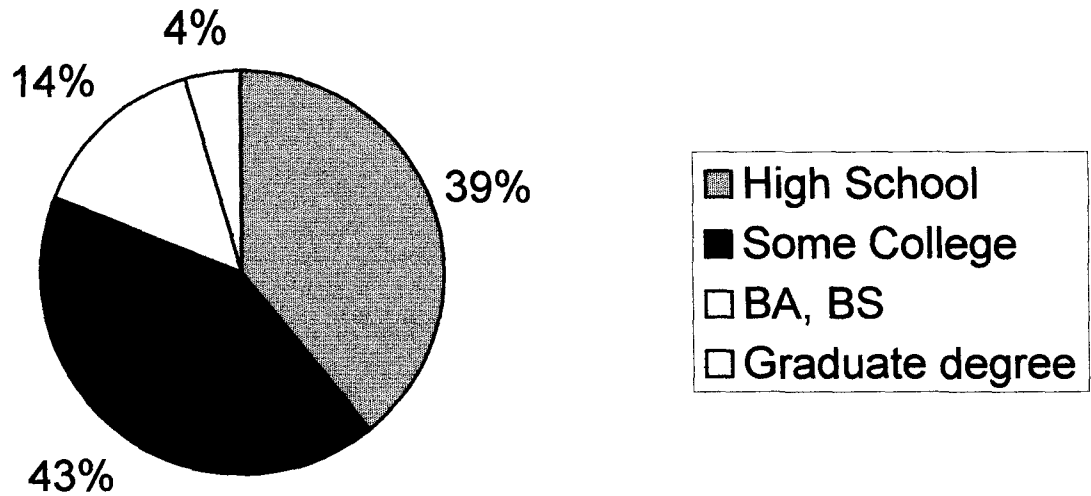


Chart 4

### Fanfiction Pop. Education Level



### Harry Potter Pop. Education Level

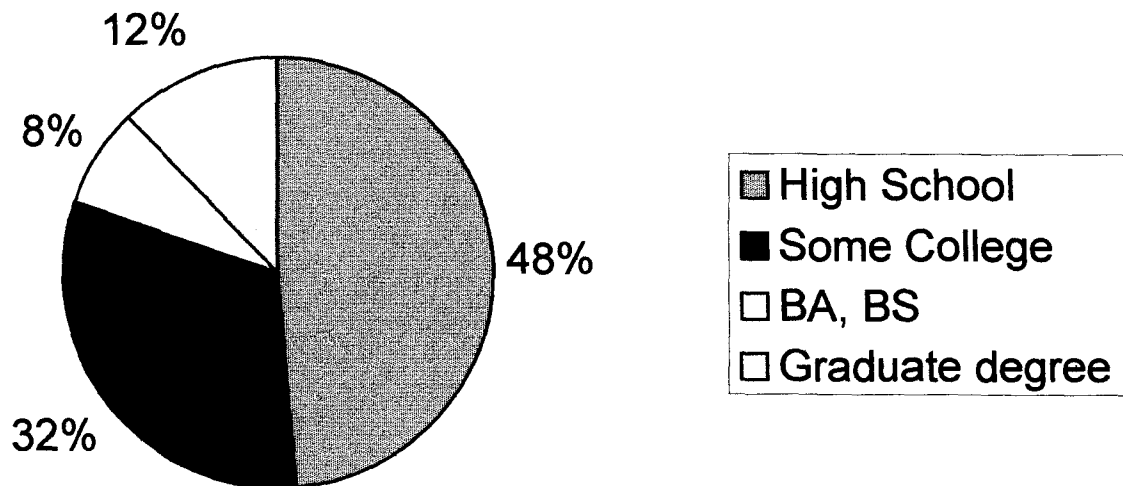
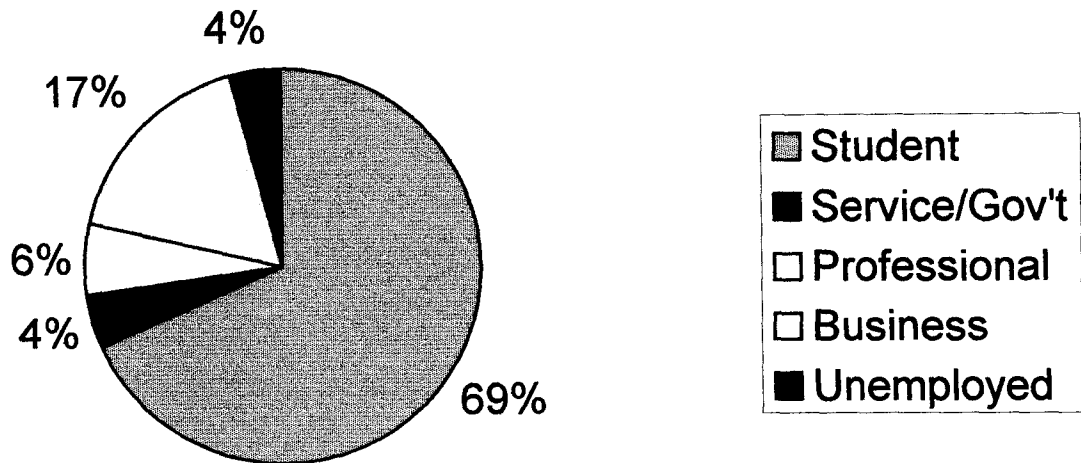


Chart 5

### Fanfiction Pop. Occupation



### Harry Potter Pop. Occupation

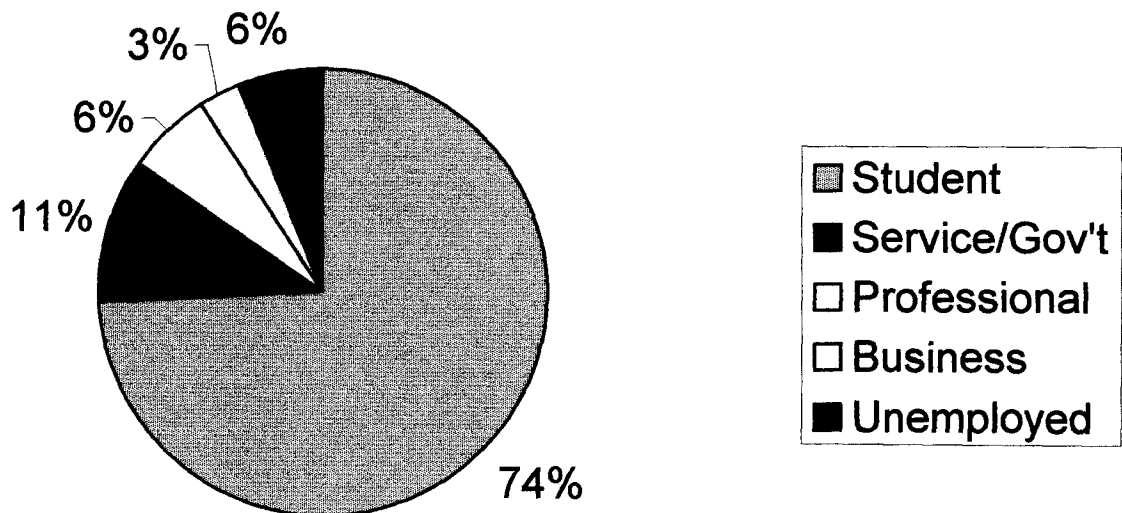
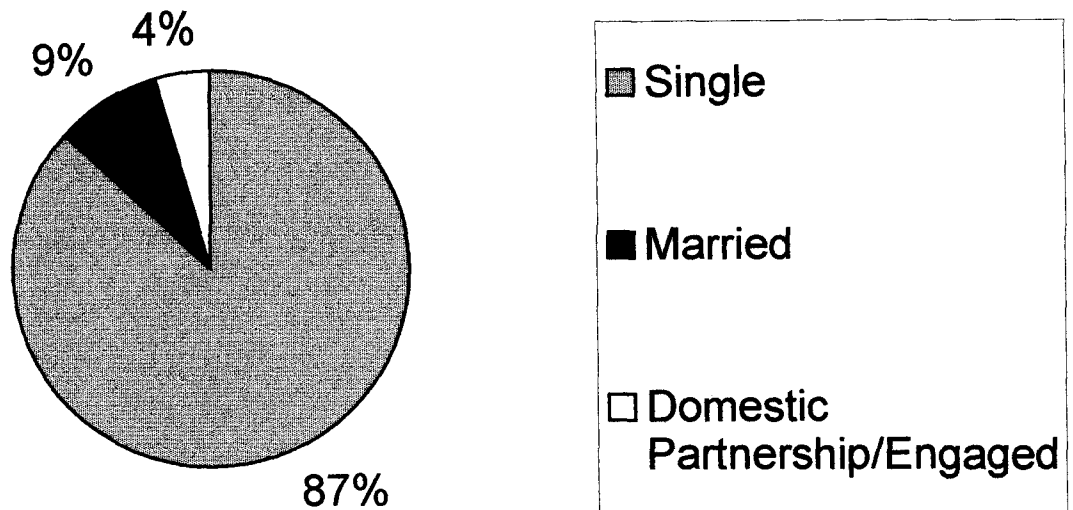


Chart 6

### Fanfiction Pop. Marital Status



### Harry Potter Pop. Marital Status

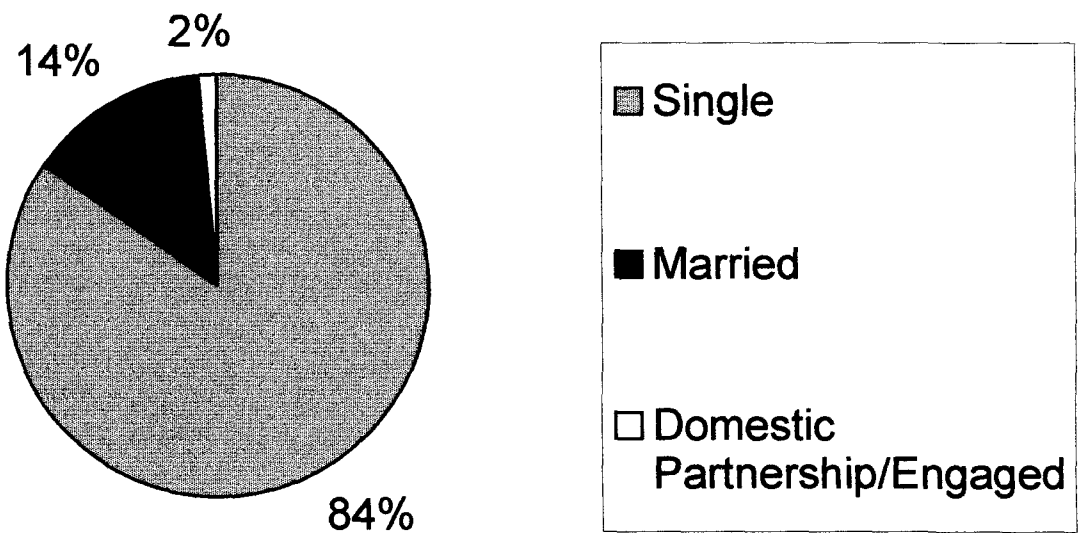
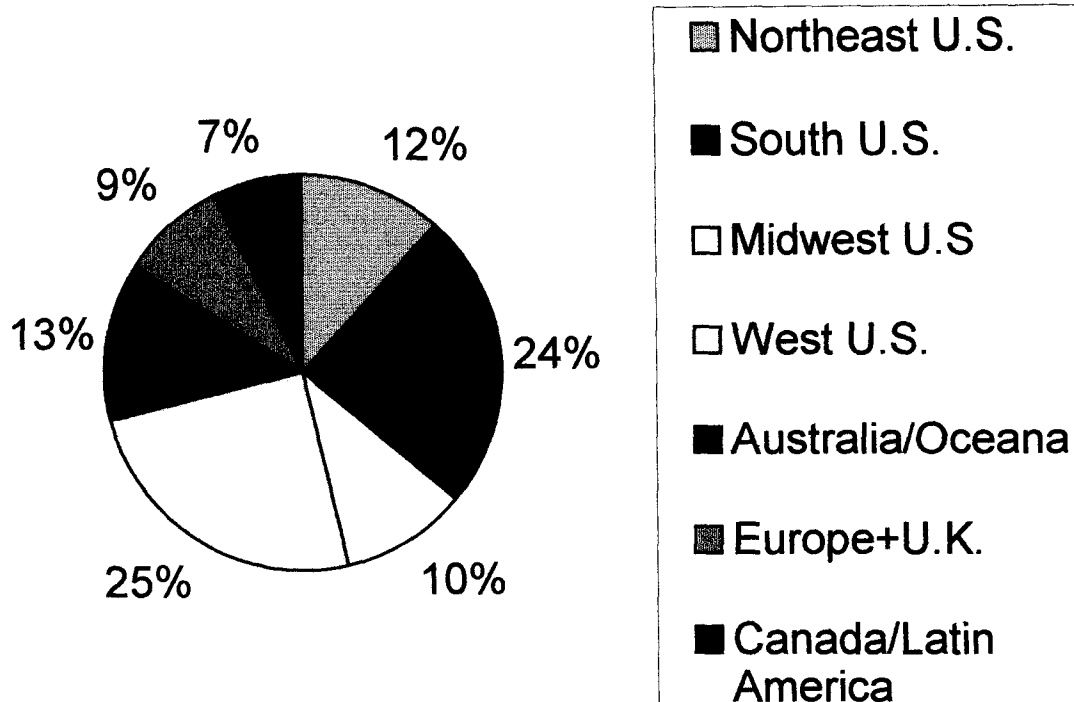
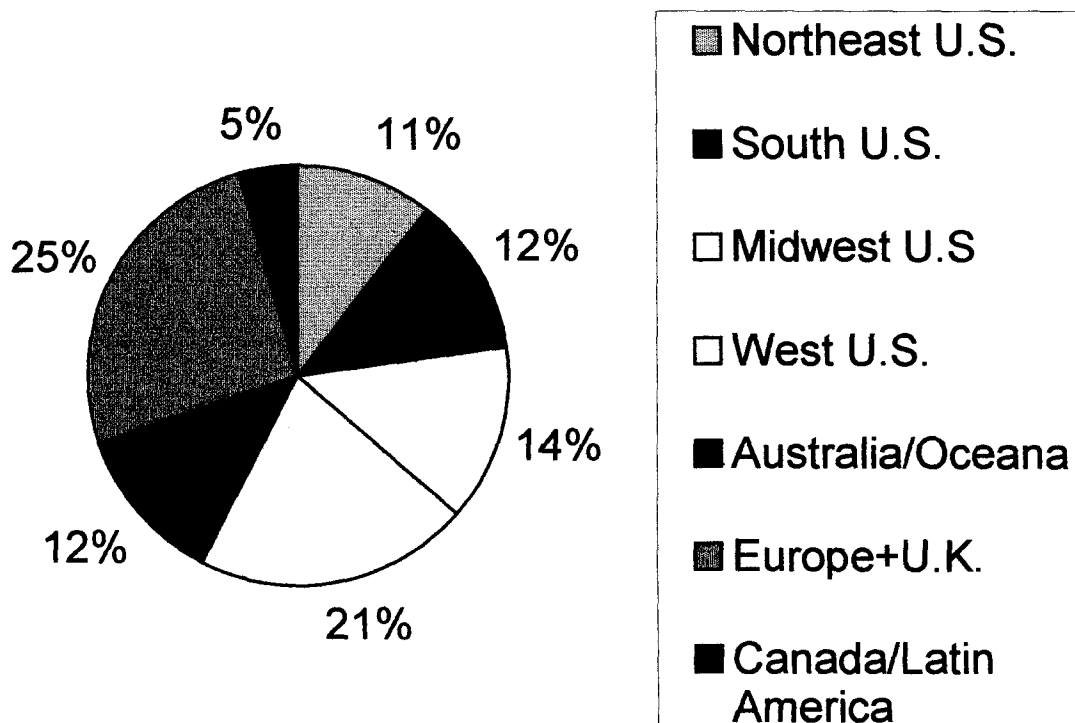


Chart 7

### Fanfiction Pop. Location



### Harry Potter Pop. Location



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