Archival Resources on the Web

To Boldly Go: The Future of Fanwork and Fan Culture Preservation

By Laney Knight

What Are Fanworks and Why Are They Important?

The word "fanwork" may be unfamiliar, yet you may recognize the idea by other names: adaptations, retellings, reimaginings, anecdotes, and allegories. All share the same basic concept: they are works that use preexisting source materials as a starting point for new narratives. While fanworks are not new, the term "fanwork" is relatively recent and became popular with the widespread use of the Internet. It generally refers to any sort of user-generated content—whether written work, visual art, or interactive media—based on a book, movie, television show, or musical group.

The popularity of fanworks is simple: people want more stories and new adventures of beloved characters, or want to see new characters and ideas within a familiar narrative. The desire to create homages to old tales and to re-enliven favorite characters, tropes, and plots is an old one and has been expressed in writing, art, and even music, some of which museums, archives, and heritage institutions around the world have preserved. Today, thanks to the media and technology available, fanworks are being created in record numbers. This is exciting for fans, but potentially challenging for those attempting to preserve these works.

A Brief History of Fan Clubs and Fanzines

According to fan historians, one of the first, most visible, and active fan clubs for popular media in the United States developed around *Star Trek: The Original Series*, which aired in 1966. While geographic location often limited much interaction among likeminded groups, a rich culture emerged, mostly comprised of well-educated women interested in science and science fiction.[1] These groups debated and disseminated their ideas about the *Star Trek* universe through self-printed pamphlets known as fanzines, which were filled with stories, art, and discussions about the television show.

With the rise of the Internet in the 1990s, fan groups increasingly moved online, where they could circulate their content through a new digital format that had become all the rage: mailing lists. Now they could share their work regardless of location, allowing more fans to come together to enjoy and create more content.

Today, fans have moved from mailing lists to publishing their work online, either managing their own websites or posting to third-party platforms. The Internet has been a catalyst for the rapid growth of fanworks and their corresponding communities, and no longer are fans limited to their geographic area or circulating printed copies of materials. Archivists can easily recognize the problem with this: an almost impossible amount of records is being created in a multitude of formats, some in danger of loss and degradation depending on format, web host, and constantly changing terms of service agreements on various online platforms.

The Organization for Transformative Works

What is being done to preserve born-digital fanworks? One organization at the forefront of these efforts is the **Organization for Transformative Works** (OTW), which can be found at http://www.transformativeworks .org. The OTW is "a nonprofit organization established by fans to serve the interests of fans by providing access to and preserving the history of fanworks and fan culture in its myriad forms," which believes that the history of modern fanworks is rooted in "a primarily female culture" and that it is important to preserve "these non-mainstream expressions of cultural identity."[2] To this end, the OTW sponsors **Open Doors**, which offers "shelter to at-risk fannish content."[3] The goal is to identify fanworks and artifacts of fan culture at risk of being lost, destroyed, or degraded as platforms and formats disappear or become obsolete with the intent to archive and preserve them for posterity.

The main projects that fall under Open Doors are the **Fan Culture Preservation Project** and the **GeoCities Rescue Project**. The OTW joined forces with the Special Collections Department at the University of Iowa to create the Fan Culture Preservation Project, http:// www.transformativeworks.org/fan-culture-preservation-project. Its mission was to archive, preserve, and protect transformative fanworks. The project spanned 1979 to 2013 and comprises over 60 linear feet of materials. The focus is primarily fanzines, but some collections also contain other types of materials, including videos, artwork, correspondence, journals, and artifacts. Although no digitization initiatives for these collections exist at
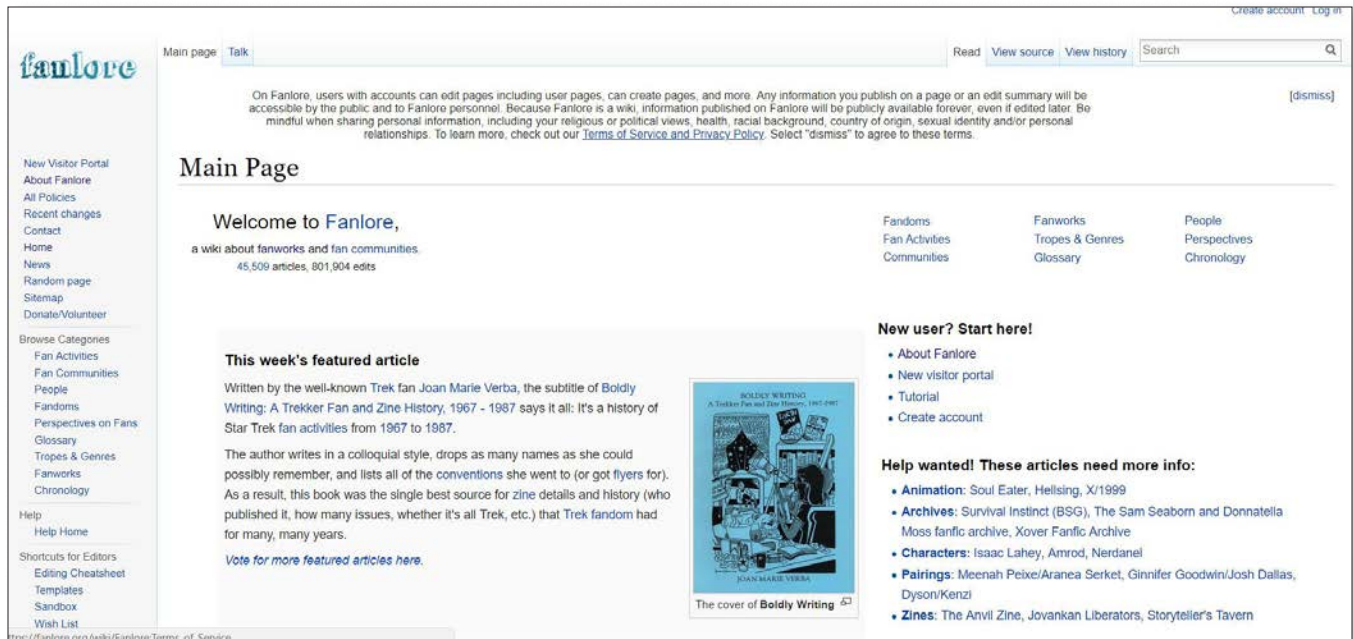
Main page of Fanlore, a wiki dedicated to fanwork communities

present, users may browse detailed finding aids to learn more about the contents.

One of the OTW's most well-known projects is **Fanlore**, https://fanlore.org/wiki/Main_Page, a wiki with a mission "to engage fans from a wide variety of communities that create and enjoy fanworks, to provide them with a platform to record and share their histories, experiences and traditions, for both themselves and others."[4] Fanlore facilitates the preservation of fanwork history via an engaged community of users who edit and contribute content. Categories include Fan Activities, Fan Communities, People, Perspectives on Fans, Tropes and Genres, Fanworks, and Glossary. In May 2015, the American Folklife Center, part of the US Library of Congress, chose Fanlore to be archived as part of the Digital Culture Web Archive. Nicole Saylor, head of the American Folklife Center, explained that Fanlore was selected because "fandom enacts so many of the key elements of folklore and vernacular culture . . . where communities had worked to synthesize, organize and collect examples of practice."[5]

Integrated with Fanlore is one of the OTW's other major projects: the GeoCities Rescue Project, http://www.transformativeworks.org/geocities-rescue-project. GeoCities was a web hosting service created in 1994 and purchased in 1999 by Yahoo.[6] Ten years after the acquisition, Yahoo announced that it would be shutting down GeoCities in every region except Japan.[7] Over 38 million websites

were shut down in 2009. This project intends to preserve fan-related content originally hosted on GeoCities sites by transferring fanwork archives to Fanlore or to other OTW preservation projects. Various fanwork archives have been saved thanks to this project, including art, fiction, and fan videos for media such as *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Star Trek: Voyager*, *Man from U.N.C.L.E*, *Doctor Who*, and *Lord of the Rings*.

Another of OTW's large projects is **Archive of Our Own** (AO3), https://archiveofourown.org. Launched in November of 2009, AO3 now boasts over 1.5 million users who have produced over 4 million fanworks in almost 30,000 different fan communities. Users may browse communities by category: Anime and Manga, Books and Literature, Cartoons and Comics and Graphic Novels, Movies, TV Shows, and Video Games. Some only include a single fanwork, while others number fanworks in the hundreds of thousands. AO3 differs from other fanwork sites, which might be created for a variety of reasons without consideration of long-term preservation, as it is hosted and maintained by the OTW, whose main mission is the preservation of fanworks and fan culture for posterity. AO3 regularly works in conjunction with the OTW to ensure that the site and its contents will not be lost, degraded, or altered. It is also constantly updating its user interface for ease of searching, publishing,

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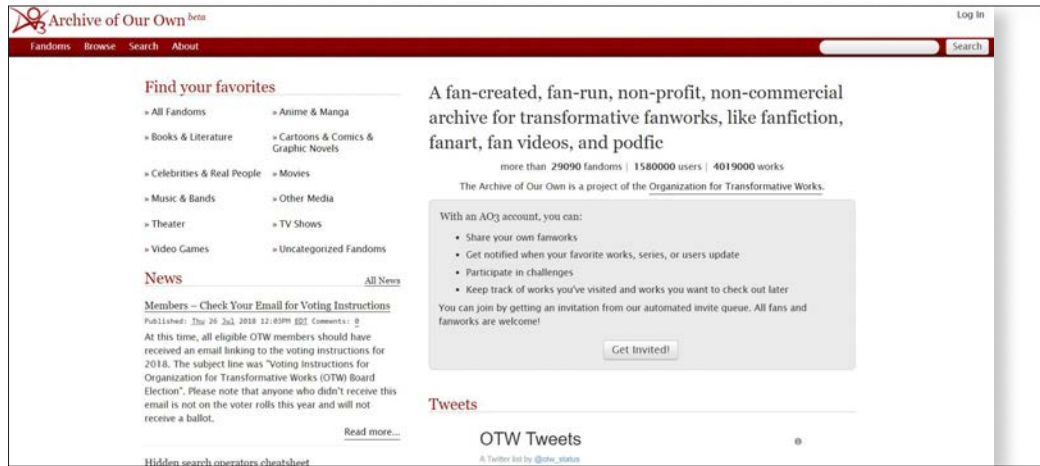
Homepage of Archive of Our Own (AO3), a site focused on preserving fanworks and fan culture

and fan communication, with emphasis on upholding metadata quality standards. In fact, AO3 stands as one of the first—if not the only—fanwork archives to employ a controlled tag vocabulary. In 2013, AO3 was recognized as " . . . the most carefully curated, sanely organized, easily browsable and searchable nonprofit collection of fan fiction on the Web" by *Time*.[8] This attention to quality has drawn fans from around the globe, creating an extremely popular and active platform for them to create, share, and collaborate. AO3 has done what no other fanwork platform has: created a living archives with preservation policies in place to ensure content longevity in a rapidly changing digital environment.

The Future of Fanworks

Some might wonder why fanworks are important. Why do the endless adventures of Kirk and Spock matter? Why do we need to save someone's novel-length interpretation about how the Doctor really feels about the Master? What value is there in a work where James Bond gives up his License to Kill to retire and open a coffee shop?

At first glance, these creations may seem odd or esoteric, but fanworks are evidence of something incredibly human. Fanworks use the well-defined lines of a particular narrative to open doors to themes and topics not represented in mainstream media. Furthermore, many creators of fanworks are women, people of color, people who identify as LGBTQIA+, disabled persons, indigenous people, and other groups whose voices are not well represented in the creative and publishing industries.

Preserving these works is a monumental but essential task. The OTW is critical in this regard, preserving old fanworks in danger of being lost to platform obsolescence or deletion, while simultaneously maintaining stable, solid platforms that actively archive new content as it is created. The OTW has started to change the way we think about fanworks and their importance and is constantly evolving as technologies, laws, and the needs of fans evolve. It could be said it is an organization with a mission similar to that of the iconic USS *Enterprise*: to boldly go where no one has gone before!

Notes

1. Francesa Coppa, "Brief History of Media Fandom," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristine Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 45.

2. "What We Believe," Organization for Transformative Works, http://www.transformativeworks.org /what_we_believe.

3. "Open Doors," Organization for Transformative Works, http://opendoors.transformativeworks.org.

4. "Fanlore:About," June 11, 2012, https://fanlore.org/ wiki/Fanlore:About.

5. "May 2015 Newsletter, Volume 91," Organization for Transformative Works, http://www.transformative-works.org/may-2015-newsletter-volume-91.

6. Karen Kaplan and Charles Piller, "Yahoo to Buy GeoCities for $3.9 Billion in Stock," *Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 1999, http://articles.latimes.com/1999/ jan/29/business/fi-2730.

7. Geoff Fox, "Yahoo Sets the Date of GeoCities' Death," *PC Magazine*, July 10, 2009, https://www.pcmag .com/article2/0,2817,2350024,00.asp.

8. Lev Grossman, "Check out Archive of Our Own on TIME's 50 Best Websites List," May 1, 2013, https:// web.archive.org/web/20160313145205/http://tech-land.time.com/2013/05/06/50-best-websites-2013/ slide/archive-of-our-own.