



## Time and Space Games on Akunin's Virtual Pages

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**Abstract:** The widespread adoption of new technologies in everyday life has had a significant impact on book culture. New media such as, for example, the Internet, have been sometimes described as being incompatible with literary culture. I argue that the internet can offer spaces where literature is created and/or discussed and that such spaces contribute to the perpetuation of reading culture through modern tools.

In Russia, the advent of the internet has coincided with the period of economic and cultural transition following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the switch to a market economy. Crime fiction author Boris Akunin rose to fame during this period and has a very active online fan base. In this article, I analyse how the peculiarities of the time and space settings of Akunin's series 'The adventures of Erast Fandorin' are presented on two websites dedicated to him and his work, and I discuss how this helps his readers to actively engage with the literary texts, enhancing their reading experience.

**Keywords:** contemporary Russian reading culture, internet, online forums, Boris Akunin

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The advent of new media and their applications in everyday life have had an undeniable impact on literary culture. The 'unintended consequences' of changes in production, distribution and fruition of knowledge are expected in the long term to produce effects equivalent to the invention of the printing press, which influenced the activities of reading and writing for centuries, contributing to shaping Western culture as we know it (Dewar 1998).

In digital media environments, new forms of information and entertainment are evolving, while non-traditional and non-linear forms of reading become more widespread. In the 1990s, some commentators judged computer technologies to be distracting and ultimately responsible for the diminishing importance of reading in our lives. The book was considered a product of a culture based on printing; therefore, the advent of new devices and new methods of delivery for the written text was predicted to be responsible for the 'death of the book', and consequently of the reading culture related to it. (Kernan 1990; Birkerts 1994).

However, the practical use of computers for storage of knowledge and the advent of the internet with its endless possibilities for diffusion of reading materials have been welcomed

with enthusiasm. Visibility, both for established and aspiring writers, has increased significantly. Online reading of traditional texts has been analysed in its implications for the act of reading (vertical reading on a screen as opposed to turning the pages of a physical book), while experimental literature has started to include varying degrees of multimedia content and to lose linearity in favour of a tendency towards a hypertextual structure. The creation and reception of 'cyberliterature' ('literature created and presented by means of a computer', Viires 2005: 154) require different approaches than those of traditional literary theory, and further underline the need for amendments in the study of the humanities to accommodate the changes brought by the technological revolution (Viires 2005).

Texts created specifically to be published online have blurred the boundaries between professional and amateur literature as blogs, with different aims and different attention to quality, and websites devoted to self-publication thrive online. In addition, the Web can offer spaces where literature is discussed interactively, perpetuating traditional reading culture through modern tools. Because of the possibilities it offers for exchanges and communication, the internet environment has been compared to a 'virtual coffeehouse' (Connery 1997) and, in the Russian context, as a continuation of typically Russian forms of literary exchange and interpersonal communication, such as *samizdat* and kitchen table talk (Gorny 2007). All these comparisons imply a certain degree of interaction: the internet user in the 2000s is not simply a passive consumer, but is part of a lively communication structure, as well as a producer of contents and meanings.

This kind of use of the online medium can be applied to virtual environments where the topic for debate is literature. Jens Kirk analyses an author's website and its forum and suggests that literary websites can function both as archives, performing an 'individual' function and a 'community' function. These communities can be studied by focusing both on the interactions themselves (that is on pure communication and its mechanisms), or by analysing the content of the communication (Kirk 2007).

In this article, I will focus on the internet as a tool for writers (or publishers) of traditional, printed books to offer extra materials and different levels of interactivity to their readers, and for readers to share information and experiences. Through the discussion of features of time and space in Boris Akunin's novels and on two websites dedicated to him, I will analyse how the time and space settings of some of Akunin's works are reflected on these websites, and how this helps his readers engage with the novels by taking their reading experience out of the pages of the book, sharing it online and relating it to wider interests. Some examples from the websites will show how the playful nature of the online medium allows readers to create and participate in intellectual stimulation, even around genres traditionally perceived as 'low'. This case study will provide an example of how new technologies are incorporated in the reading experience and can enhance it, rather than representing a distraction and rendering the literary experience more superficial.

The websites I will focus on are Akunin's official website at the address [www.akunin.ru](http://www.akunin.ru) and the fan website *Fandorin!* ([www.fandorin.ru](http://www.fandorin.ru)), dedicated to fictional detective Erast Fandorin, the main hero of Akunin's most successful series. While [akunin.ru](http://www.akunin.ru), despite introducing itself as a 'full interactive collection', does not offer any explicit possibility for interaction and has not been updated since 2005, *Fandorin!* hosts an active community. Born from fans' initiative, its contents are created by users under the supervision of a webmaster. Commen-

taries on Akunin's historical mistakes, collections of anecdotes and fan fiction are only a few of the initiatives of the website, and they are all the creation of numerous users, in line with the Web 2.0 tendency to see users acting as both producers and consumers of content. Moreover, the website presents a discussion forum, where most of the activity takes place and from which most of my examples will be taken.

### **Russian literary culture in the era of the internet**

My analysis refers specifically to the environment of the Russian internet, as well as to the contemporary Russian literary scene. Both these contexts present local peculiarities because of the developments in Russian society and culture since the fall of the Soviet Union. The widespread adoption of new media in Russia has coincided with an era of social and cultural transition. In this context, the 'end of literature' is considered to be a consequence of the revolution in literary practices caused by the fall of the regime (Marsh 1993), and of the emergence of a Western-style popular culture where reading has lost its privileged position (Johnson's Russia List 2005). Russian and Soviet culture have been described as 'literature-centric': in the Soviet Union, material books used to represent 'status symbol' items to be displayed in the house of every educated person (Beumers 2005: 292), and enjoyed high cultural value as 'the main transmitter and emblem of Soviet *kul'turnost*' (Lovell 2000: 21). Books were also scarce products (Lovell 2000: 70-71) – a factor which only enhanced their cult status. In the post-Soviet cultural scene, the Russian 'reading myth' (Lovell 2000: 1) has lost its importance and the symbolism of the material book has shifted significantly, primarily because of the turn to a capitalistic market, where books are readily available commodities. The dynamic relationship between digital and traditional reading gains, therefore, a further level of complexity in the Russian context.

The Runet is, in fact, proving to be an important space for literary developments. For example, it is contributing to the diffusion of written texts in the vast territory of the Russian Federation, as online libraries represent a significant phenomenon in Russian online culture (one of the earliest and most popular, Moshkov's Library, has been online since 1994 – see Schmidt 2009). In addition to traditional texts on screen, the Runet offers numerous examples of online literary activity: writers' communities (for example, the community *Vavilon* and its successor *Argo*, which promote young authors and publish literary journals), literary blogs (Gusejnov 2006; Rutten 2009), self-publication websites (such as *proza.ru* and *stihi.ru*, both collecting thousands of works of prose and poetry, respectively), forums and communities for discussion. The Runet therefore offers a large amount of valuable materials to study the intersection of the reading experience with an online experience.

Although the *Fandorin!* website gathers only a portion of Akunin's fans and a portion of Russian internet users,<sup>1</sup> the examples it provides represent a particular way to live a literary experience, which for the first time involves new technologies as a relatively popular medium.

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<sup>1</sup> Internet penetration in the Russian Federation was calculated at 40% at the end of 2010 according to RAEC, the Russian Association of Electronic Communications.

### Akunin and celebrity culture

Naturally, most contemporary Russian writers have personal websites as well as fan websites. However, Akunin is one of the authors who most clearly demonstrate an awareness of the role of new technologies in literary culture. He has incorporated new media within his literary production in the novel *Kvest* (2008), inspired by the computer games genre of the 'quest': the novel exists both in an online version (accessible at the address [www.elkniga.ru/akunin](http://www.elkniga.ru/akunin)) and a paper version, which complement each other rather than simply replicating the same text on two different media. The *Kvest* project represents a significant example of the use of opportunities offered by the internet to expand the possibilities of literature and engage with the curiosity of a modern, sophisticated public through 'transmedia storytelling' (Jenkins 2006b). In addition, a videogame version of the novel *Nefritovie Chetki* (2007, not yet translated into English) was planned but never realised, allegedly because Akunin, notoriously passionate about computer games (Markelova 2008), was not satisfied with the final product.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the author uses the internet to establish contact with his readers, both indirectly through his official website, and through participation in periodical question sessions on the forum of the *Fandorin!* website.<sup>3</sup>

Both Akunin and his main character, Fandorin, are genuine celebrities in the Russian literary scene. Akunin, whose real name is Grigorii Chkhartishvili, rose to fame in the late 1990s with a series of historical detective novels set in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which narrate the adventures of fictional detective Erast Fandorin and, later in the series, of some of Fandorin's ancestors and grandchildren. According to the editorial commentary of a book about Akunin, 'it is possible, even nowadays, to find someone who has not read Boris Akunin's novels, but you really will not find anyone who has not heard of him' ('Moskva Akuninskaia' 2008).<sup>4</sup>

Fandorin is the first and the most successful of Akunin's heroes. He is also the most discussed online, where he is treated by his fans almost as a veritable historical character: some of his admirers created the *Fandorin!* website, entirely dedicated to him, as well as a virtual museum in his name. Fandorin represents to the contemporary Russian reader a role model to admire and be inspired by. Modelled on the best qualities of 'the Russian *intelligent*, the English gentleman and the Japanese samurai' (De Lotto 2002: 4), Fandorin is a self-made man who bases his moral code on his relation with other people and not with the state, and who acts in accordance with his own personal ideals of honour and dignity. He thus incarnates the values of the emerging middle-class, which is for the first time in Russian history developing an entrepreneurial character, relying on itself rather than on higher institutions, in a society where values are no longer dictated from above (Aron 2004).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=a586d2127d6a1d5a9c7be636c1eb2b13&threadid=4790> (accessed 18 March 2011).

<sup>3</sup> The most recent to date, the 'winter series 2009-2010', was published on the forum on 28 February 2010. <http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=0b0749bbea591a545a12d36b4e26fc62&threadid=5273> (accessed 18 March 2011)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ozon.ru/context/detail/id/3791664/> (accessed 31 January 2011).

While the literary author and the written text have always enjoyed a high status in Russian and Soviet culture, Akunin's and Fandorin's celebrity status is typical of a commodity culture, based on 'contemporary notions of celebrity' as well as on the rules of a capitalistic book market (Baer and Korchagina 2010: 78). In this context, the proliferation of online spaces devoted to specific literary phenomena alongside traditional printed magazines contributes to the consolidation of their celebrity status, and to an 'intensification' of fans' activity (Baer and Korchagina 2010: 84). The relationship between fandom and new technologies is a deep and productive one: naturally, expressions of fandom have existed long before the internet, and collaborative experience has always represented one of their main aspects (Jenkins 1992). However, fans adapted quickly and eagerly to the environment of the internet, where their exchanges take advantage of the rapidity of computer-mediated communication, and of the possibility to share multimedia content (Jenkins 2006a). Consequently, fan culture has today become deeply entwined with online culture. Television fandom is nowadays increasingly studied through online forums (Jenkins 2006b). In the same way, it is useful to look both at authors' websites and fan websites to discuss literary culture: the high amount of media convergence that characterises contemporary culture involves the printed book and the way it is discussed through other media. A reading public increasingly used to transmediality can immediately recognise the characteristics of a book that will allow to play with the text across media and to create further meanings through online discussion. As my case study will suggest, on Akunin's fan website the author's ability to provide his readers with intellectual stimulation meets the interest of a part of his public in a reading experience that extends beyond the book and becomes immersed in internet culture.

### **Akunin and the Riddle of Time**

Akunin's celebrity status is not only constructed by the dynamics of contemporary popular culture, but is born primarily out of interest in the content of his books, which combine 'high' and 'low' culture by employing an elaborate writing style and making abundant use of cultural, literary and historical references. Through cultural allusions, the attentive reader is prompted to make connections between the subject of the books and his/her own personal knowledge (De Lotto 2002).

Time is especially fundamental to Akunin's work. Akunin explains his fascination with history by declaring himself 'charmed' by the 'riddle of time':

I don't understand what to think of time, what to think of people who lived, loved, hated, had feelings and suddenly stopped existing. I have a serious suspicion that they are somewhere around us, we just don't see them, but sometimes we feel them. And in Moscow – a city that I know well and that I love – there are places where this time stagnates, and where I feel that these people are really close. The mystery of their disappeared – or maybe not disappeared - life charms me. History, from my point of view, is the most important of sciences, or in any case it intrigues me the most. The Fandorin genealogy is an attempt to penetrate the thickness of time. ('Menia Zavorazhivaet Zagadka Vremeni', 2001).<sup>5</sup>

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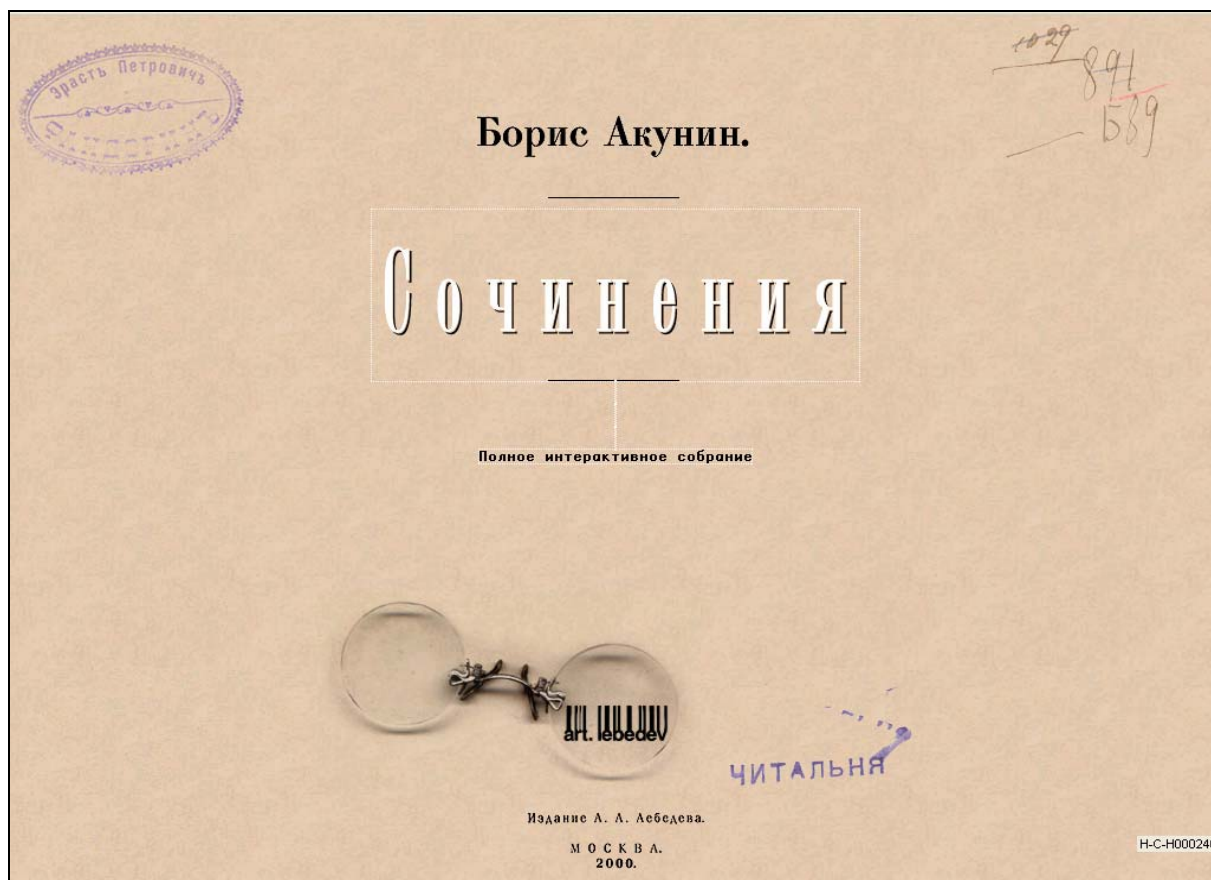
<sup>5</sup> All translations are mine.

In this article I focus on the series ‘the adventures of Erast Fandorin’, whose temporal setting invites the reader to compare the time of the novels with the present. Like the 2000s, the late nineteenth century represents a time of relative stability in Russian history, following a period of major reforms when cultural values were being reassessed. The abolition of serfdom in 1861 and the reforms that accompanied it had a deep impact on Russian society and mentality, in much the same way as the transition to a market economy had in the 1990s. However, in the immediately subsequent period, state control became tighter again after the assassination of the Tsar in 1881: a parallel has been established with the more authoritarian turn taken by Putin after the liberal period of Yeltsin’s reforms (Aron 2004). It is easy therefore to find a connection between Fandorin’s time and the present, an era of transition from the turbulent 1990s, when Russians in the post-Soviet space are starting to make sense of the new world order (Aron 2004). The decades preceding the revolution are nowadays often nostalgically idealised as a prosperous time of stability before the course of history changed; however, history is not used by Akunin with the aim of promoting a nostalgic view, but rather of deconstructing this idealisation by showing the negative as well as the positive aspects of this era and their relation to the contemporary time (Baraban 2004), by presenting a ‘projection’ (Khagi 2005) of contemporary values in a historical setting.

### **History on the websites**

Akunin’s interest in time and history and the subtle equation between the setting of the Fandorin series and the readers’ time is not only present in the novels, but is made explicit on the writer’s official web space [www.akunin.ru](http://www.akunin.ru), Akunin’s ‘full interactive collection’. Despite not offering the possibility for interaction in the literal sense (only two simple games are offered), a clear sense of play with the time and the atmosphere of the novels is evident even at an initial, superficial glance. The graphics and contents of this website are all based on this temporal shift. The website is presented as a retro-looking space, whose appearance aims to give the pages a nineteenth-century flavour, through the use of fonts and colours recalling old documents and images of objects such as old spectacles (see Figure 1). These graphic choices allow users of the website to immediately engage with the time of the novels.

Meticulous attention has been paid to all graphic aspects; significantly, the design of the website has been provided by Artemii Lebedev’s studio, rated as the main design studio in Russia in 2009 (Tagline 2009). The author’s website thus becomes an example of shared authorship: the contents belong to Akunin’s books, but their visual implementation is the responsibility of a professional of digital arts (Lebedev himself is a well-known personality in the Runet). The copyright statement at the bottom of the menu page does cite both authors, Akunin for the texts and Lebedev for the graphic aspect of the website. Literature enters in dynamic interaction with web design in order to reproduce the atmosphere of the printed page on the virtual page of the website.

**Figure 1.** The homepage of Akunin's official website.

Source: <http://www.akunin.ru> (accessed 26 January 2011).

Besides the texts of the novels collected on the website, the other contents of [akunin.ru](http://www.akunin.ru) are considerably visually-oriented, with little text, mostly captions, and an emphasis on pictures. The whole website looks to the past: the materials presented are all related to the nineteenth century and function as a selection of supplementary material to the novels, allowing the reader to better understand, and most of all to visualise, some cultural artefacts and styles of the time, and therefore to easily connect with the text.

Some examples of materials presented are: a table of ranks, tables of weather signs and of the zodiac, maps of the universe, of bread distribution in the world and of the world's population. A phrenological treaty completes the bizarre list of 'useful historical facts and documents', while a 'portrait of the author' in nineteenth century attire represents the only mention of the author on his official website (no biographical or bibliographical information is present).

An entire section of the website is dedicated to a 'combined history of Moscow', and introduces another important element of Akunin's novels and of Akunin's fandom: territorial localisation. Half a map of nineteenth century Moscow joined with half a map of contemporary Moscow welcomes the user to this section of the website, and symbolises the juxtaposition of the two time frames, which continues with images of Moscow composed of modern elements (for example a parked car, or contemporary tourists with cameras) pasted into paint-

ings or photographs from the turn of the twentieth century. These pictures play on the two time levels, and make their juxtaposition explicit in space by involving not only a time shift, but also real locations. This section of the website seems to illustrate the author's feelings towards time and towards Moscow expressed earlier: a space where times are juxtaposed and the life of people who lived in the past is interwoven with the present time.

Furthermore, the recognition of a temporal shift and of familiar places and the visualisation of late-nineteenth century imagery through the graphics and the information presented on the website allow the reader to take his reading experience out of the pages of the novel and into the virtual pages of the website. In this way, despite not being interactive in the literal sense, *akunin.ru* is more than just an archive of texts and bizarre historical information. Clearly,

the goal of the website is to help its users plunge into the era in which the actions of the novels unfold and feel as participants of the game starting in the book and continuing on the computer. The website becomes an independent work of art, and not an appendix to the collection of works. Evidently, the future of electronic literature is precisely in such online continuations of printed books. (Makarnin 2000).

This comment from a review of literary websites is extremely insightful on the function the internet can represent for literature as an interactive platform, where the reading experience can evolve and be enriched by further stimulations. Akunin's work seems to serve this purpose perfectly with its use of a different historical time that can be related to the present and literary and cultural references that create a strong ground for the production of original reflection outside of the pages of the novels, even in the absence of multimedia content or interactive spaces for commentaries.

Readers' reflection is taken further and inserted in a decidedly interactive environment on *Fandorin!*, where the engagement of users beyond the solitary experience of reading becomes explicit and visible, thanks to the collaborative nature of this web space and to the forum. *Fandorin!*'s graphic style again recalls the nineteenth century and is quite similar to the style used on Akunin's official website (however, this is declared to be a coincidence; Akunet 2000). Despite this evident similarity, this website is not subordinate to *akunin.ru* and does not represent the fan page of Akunin's official space: it is independent and was born out of the initiative of a fan. Named after the character and not after its author, it situates itself not as a continuation of Akunin's website, but as a parallel space. This can represent a further way for the reading experience to exist beyond the book: the character of Fandorin becomes alive in people's imagination and is worthy of his own website (see Figure 2), or rather his 'file', with his own biography, descriptions taken from the novels, genealogical tree, and even a virtual museum.



**Figure 2.** 'New materials in the file': the news section and menu (on the right hand side) of Fandorin's website.

*Новые материалы в деле*

**Акунин отвечает на вопросы читателей после "Весь мир - театр"**  
28/02/2010 года, 11:46 | Аллик

Борис Акунин ответил на вопросы читателей, возникшие после выхода книги "Весь мир - театр". Ответы - на форуме.

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**Приним читательских вопросов Акунину (звонкая серия - 2010)**  
12/1/2010 года, 10:30 | bаgаn

На нашем форуме вновь открыт прием читательских вопросов Борису Акунину. Задать их может любой зарегистрированный форумчанин до **31.01.2010**.

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**Новости Музейчика им. Э.П. Фандорина**  
27/12/2009 года, 18:26 | Мйке

На главной странице Музейчика - декабрьская "картинка месяца": здание, в котором выступала группа "Ноев ковчег" и разыгрывались страсти-мордасти, а также документальное подтверждение "возвышенных цен местам".


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**22 декабря - старт продаж романа "Весь мир театр"**  
22/12/2009 года, 23:22 | bаgаn

Сегодня новый роман фандориняны "Весь мир театр" поступил в официальную продажу.

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**Новый Фандорин. Совсем скоро.**  
10/12/2009 года, 22:13 | bаgаn



До выхода в свет нового романа о приключениях Эраста Фандорина "Весь мир театр" остается меньше двух недель. По сведениям издательства "Захаров", книга поступит в продажу **22 декабря 2009** года. Стартовый тираж — 500 тыс. экземпляров.

**МУЗЕЙЧИК**  
им. Э.П. Фандорина

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Часто задаваемые вопросы

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Титульный лист

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Новые материалы в дело

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Архив материалов:  
Про Акунина  
Про сайт  
Обновления

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Досье на г-на Фандорина:

Анкета  
Словесный портрет  
Из истории рода  
**Генеалогическое древо**  
Корнелиус фон Дорн  
Данила Ларионович  
Фандорин  
Самсон Данилович  
Фандорин  
Ветвь Фон-Дорнов (Россия)  
Ника Фандорин  
Показания свидетелей  
Показания Фандорина  
Связи: порочащие и не очень  
Именины Эраста Петровича

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Досье на г-на Акунина:

Биография  
Произведения Акунина  
Труды Чхартишвили  
Интервью  
Рецензии

N-C-H0002

Source: <http://www.fandorin.ru/main.html> (accessed 26 January 2011).

## Visiting Fandorin's Virtual Museum

A virtual museum has been dedicated to Fandorin (see Figure 3), underlining his role as an almost realistic character belonging to a carefully described historical era. The museum was created on the initiative of a passionate reader, but submission of materials by other users is encouraged. The museum contains 'web companions' (some of which are in English and Bulgarian, testifying to the worldwide success of the author) to some of Akunin's novels, mostly from the Fandorin series, consisting of views and maps of areas of nineteenth-century Saint Petersburg and Moscow, where the action of the novels takes place. In addition, just as in a real museum, we are instructed on railway travel and culinary habits of the time, among other topics, while a gallery of portraits illustrates influential people of the time who might have served as prototypes for Akunin's characters. Besides being informative for readers, this section further contributes to bridging the gap between the historical era of the novels and the

present: these ‘faces of the time’ were existing personalities in Fandorin’s time, while we know now that Akunin in the present day has studied them to create literary characters.

**Figure 3.** ‘The E.P. Fandorin Historical-Artistic Museum’.

The Erast P. Fandorin Virtual Museum for readers of *The Winter Queen*, *Death of Achilles* and other books by B. Akunin

**ИСТОРИКО-ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННЫЙ МУЗЕЙЧИК**  
имени Э.П. Фандорина  
300 FOREVER!

**Fandorin in St. Petersburg**  
People and views from the late 19th century: your Web companion to the *Winter Queen*.

**Fandorin in Moscow**  
People and views from the late 19th century: your Web companion to the *Death of Achilles*.

**Турецкий гамбит**  
Люди, места, события.

**Турски гамбит**  
Хора, места, события.

**Фандоринский Петербург**  
Петербургские виды и сцены на старых открытках и фотографиях.

**Рыбников в Петербурге**  
Маршрут штабс-капитана Рыбникова 14 мая 1905 г., по «Алмазной Колеснице».

**Лица эпохи**  
Портретная галерея персонажей и прототипов «Фандориалы».

**Фандорин-Экспресс**  
Железнодорожные мотивы «Фандориалы» на старых открытках и фотографиях.

**Кушать подано!**  
Где и что ели-пили фандоринские современники.

**Из Петербурга в Лондон**  
Путешествие Фандорина в Лондон, описанное в «Азазеле».

**Пелагия на Святой Земле**  
По мотивам романа «Пелагия и красный петух».

**Русская полиция в конце XIX - начале XX в.**

**Фандорин!**  
Новости  
Часто задаваемые вопросы  
Досье на г-на Фандорина  
Досье на г-на Акунина  
Акунистика  
Форум  
Акунет

Замечания, предложения и пожертвования в виде относящихся к делу изображений (< 200К) просьба направлять сюда.  
© 2002-2009. Michael Chertisky / Михаил Черейский (idea, texts and design / идея, тексты и дизайн)

**Картинка месяца: декабрь 2009**

**Предыдущие «картинки месяца»**

Большая часть действия романа Акунина «Весь мир театр» происходит в здании московского Новейшего театра, в котором играет труппа «Ноев ковчег». Здание это существует на самом деле и находится, как и указывает автор, на Театральной площади. Сейчас в нем размещается тот самый театр РАМТ, ради которого Акунин делает оговорку, признаваясь в целом не слишком восторженным отношении к театральному искусству.

В 1911 г., когда разворачиваются перипетии романа, это здание, сооруженное в 1821 г. и многократно с тех пор перестроенное, принадлежало Императорскому Новому театру, созданному Дирекцией императорских театров в качестве сценической площадки для молодых актеров Большого и Малого театров. Его периодически арендовали для своих выступлений различные, но неизменно «серьезные» антрепризы и труппы.

На спектакли с участием кумиров публики – скажем, Шляпина в частной опере Змиина – цены на билеты в Новый театр устанавливались «возвышенными», как справедливо упоминает о том Акунин.

Source: <http://museum.fandorin.ru/> (accessed 26 January 2011)

Similarly to the materials on [akunin.ru](http://akunin.ru), the museum aims at reinforcing the relationship between readers’ experience and the time of the novels, allowing its visitors to catch a glimpse of the world through the eyes of a contemporary of their hero. In particular, the ‘web companions’ encourage readers to ‘follow Mr. Fandorin through the streets and squares of St. Petersburg and see the same places, just as they appeared in the late nineteenth century and were pictured on antique photos, postcards and paintings’ (from the section ‘Erast Fandorin in St. Petersburg’), so that they can immerse themselves in a virtual tour of Fandorin’s time. Even without explicitly joining pictures of different periods, the effect provided by the museum is similar to that of the ‘combined history of Moscow’ on Akunin’s website: the time of the novel and the present time are superimposed in the imagination of readers. Through the museum, readers can see how places they might have walked past (if they live in or have visited Moscow or Saint Petersburg) appeared in the period in which their favourite series of novels is set, and notice the differences brought about by time, thus figuratively juxtaposing their real life experience with life in Fandorin’s stories.

### Around Fandorin's Places

Even more actively, willing readers can combine the reading experience and the virtual experience and make them real by purposely visiting these places with the eyes of an *akunist* (as users of the website jokingly call themselves – a specialist in Akunin-related knowledge, engaged in active research about the novels).

Naturally, the places visited will no longer look exactly as in those pictures: the experience allows once again the juxtaposition of the contemporary appearance of these locations with life in Fandorin's stories. In this way, the experience of a fan of Akunin who is involved online keeps on going back and forth from the printed page of the novel to the virtual world of the website and to the 'real' world of known places.

Users of *Fandorin!* have organised walks around 'Fandorin's places'. The first walks took place in the early 2000s, and detailed reports, complete with photographs, were posted on the website in a dedicated section called 'Around Fandorin's places' [*Po Fandorinskim mestam*].<sup>6</sup> Every interested visitor to the website is invited to attend the walks. Dates and details of these meetings are discussed and arranged on the forum, which presents a section by the same name, and where the reports have been posted in the following years. Through the walks, the character of Fandorin once again becomes alive, at the level of an existing historical character: for example, one of the suggested walks is directed to Fandorin's house.

Users who cannot attend the walks, particularly those from outside Moscow, where most of the activity takes place, wait impatiently for the reports. One user writes in the forum thread for the organisation of a walk around the settings of the novel *Koronatsiia* in the occasion of the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coronation of Tsar Nikolai II:

'The idea is simply super, but unfortunately I cannot take part! 😞 I do not live in Moscow, and I'd really want to, even more because I'm writing an assignment on Akunin's books. There would be interesting material...When you come back from the walk, do tell [about it]. 🙏🙏' (M. 21/04/2006).<sup>7</sup>

Naturally, the possibility to join a collective visit to the places of Fandorin's adventures is almost exclusive to those forum users who live in Moscow or St. Petersburg or close to these cities. However, the opportunity offered by the online medium to share the experience of the walks through pictures and tales allows more distant readers to know about them and to feel closer to other readers' experiences, and to the novels themselves. Fandorin's fans therefore make use of one of the most immediate advantages of the internet: impressions about experiences can be shared quickly and easily with other users who do not have the possibility to realise their own reading experience in the same way. It is interesting to note that Akunin's fans do not generally meet up simply to get to know each other in person, but their meetings are Akunin-themed and involve historical walks.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.fandorin.ru/akunistics/sightseeing/index.html> (accessed 22 March 2011).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=119519d60132d2eadcd545c5ee06c88b&threadid=4146&perpage=15&pagenumber=1> (accessed 1 February 2011).

The depth of readers' research work on Akunin's production is evident from their attention to the question of space and time in the Fandorin cycle. Besides the collective walks, one of the main activities in the dedicated section of the forum involves posting and discussing pictures of 'Fandorin's places', usually in Moscow, but also of Akunin-related places users have visited out of Russia. For example, a thread collects pictures taken in the French town of St. Malo, where Akunin owns a house; in addition, photographs of Fandorin's places in London from the novel *Azazel* have been collected by a user on a website (*Fandorinskii London*) created specifically for the purpose of adding to the information present online about Fandorin in London, which so far only existed in the virtual museum.

The research stimulated by Fandorin's adventures has also inspired two published works; these books have become a source of further discussion and commentary on the forum. *Fandorinskaia Moskva* [Fandorin's Moscow, 2008] by Andrei Staniukovich has been warmly received by users of the *Fandorin!* forum. Readers use the thread dedicated to the book to exchange information on where to buy it and at which price it can be found in different shops. Very early in the thread, the author of the book writes a message and starts a conversation with the users. He introduces himself as follows:

All my life I have been dealing with scientific issues, which could be summarised with the expression 'complex source studies'. As I knew Akunin's work almost by heart, when I was asked to write this book I agreed immediately, and decided to approach the Fandorin novels as they were historical sources. This is how I wrote. Only, my book is not scientific at all. (K. 26/03/2008).<sup>8</sup>

Staniukovich explicitly asks for feedback, especially about mistakes that readers found in his book. The readers soon realise that the book is written by an enthusiastic reader of Akunin, just like themselves: '[The book] shows that Andrei Kirillych is involved in the game of *akunistika*, and does not speak as a critic without passion', a reader comments (C., 06/04/2008). Other users welcome the author on the forum and express their enthusiasm for the book with warm messages:

I will buy it and read it with pleasure! It was a fantastic idea to write such a book! Thanks. (Psb. 02/04/2008).<sup>9</sup>

I think I'll read it in parallel with *Azazel*, so that it would supplement [the novel] with pictures and photographs. (C. 02/04/2008).<sup>10</sup>

I read it with great pleasure. Now we have a guidebook for Fandorin's places and a competent commentary to our favourite books. And if [the author] will like it here, [we'll have] another historian-*akunist*-researcher of mistakes. (C. 06/04/2008).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=7757dda1ebb31ea02668bff6cb9b7b41&threadid=4765> (accessed 1 February 2011).

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=7757dda1ebb31ea02668bff6cb9b7b41&threadid=4765> (accessed 1 February 2011).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=7757dda1ebb31ea02668bff6cb9b7b41&threadid=4765> (accessed 1 February 2011).

I laughed to myself, as 5-6 years ago I had a similar idea myself. I read with a pencil all the Moscow books about Fandorin, I climbed over heaps of manuals in search of information about the places where Erast Petrovich set foot, I went around Moscow with a camera. In a few days I'll definitely buy and read the book. I'll compare it with the information that I managed to find by myself. (B. 08/07/2008).<sup>12</sup>

On this occasion, the forum allows interaction between the author of a published research book and the primary audience for that book, allowing for a fruitful exchange of opinions and information between the two parts. Users who are passionate about history and engage in active reading can see how their passion is shared by professional writers and is legitimised by its collection in a printed book.

The second book, *Moskva Akuninskaia* [Akunin's Moscow, 2008], by Maria Besedina, is more controversial for the users of the *Fandorin!* forum. One user criticises the author for the 'zealousness' with which she 'discloses' Akunin's historical mistakes and 'ambiguities':

It makes me feel like telling her 'Maria Borisovna, Erast Fandorin didn't exist AT ALL. Can you imagine. Totally not. And it's useless to argue whether or not there was a hotel in that place, in any case he didn't stop there'. (S. 10/03/2008).<sup>13</sup>

This argument is in contrast with a considerable part of the activity on this forum, as several of its users are involved in research about Fandorin's places. In fact, soon afterwards, a different user defends Besedina:

It might be that Besedina is simply not a writer, but a historian and for this reason her stylistic faults are justifiable, [...] and getting to know where was what – it really is interesting. In Akunin's novels this mysterious and perhaps mythical city [...] remains mysterious and mythical [...]. Unusual, incomprehensible names: did this all exist at all, did it not [...]. And I long to know, what really is there and what was there. (SM. 10/03/2008).<sup>14</sup>

This user's words effectively explain one of the main interests of users of *Fandorin!*: research on the actual existence or on details about the real location and function of 'Fandorin's places'.

In fact, amateur historical research is not left exclusively to published volumes, but is meticulously practiced by *akunists* online. Akunin's readers, like their favourite author, pay great attention to historical detail and invest a lot of energy in research while they actively try to relate the space they live in to the places where situations from the novels are set and

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=0b0749bbea591a545a12d36b4e26fc62&threadid=4765&page=15&pagenumber=2> (accessed 1 February 2011).

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=0b0749bbea591a545a12d36b4e26fc62&threadid=4765&page=15&pagenumber=3> (accessed 1 February 2011)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=7757dda1ebb31ea02668bff6cb9b7b41&threadid=4762> (accessed 1 February 2011).

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=7757dda1ebb31ea02668bff6cb9b7b41&threadid=4762> (accessed 1 February 2011).



where characters of the novels have supposedly lived. As on akunin.ru, the juxtaposition of times is expressed visually: contemporary pictures, often taken by users themselves, are shown next to old pictures, usually found on the internet; old maps are compared with contemporary ones (often simply pasted from Google Maps) in order to find the exact location of a certain event of the novels. Pictures and maps are often examined and analysed carefully, as in this example:

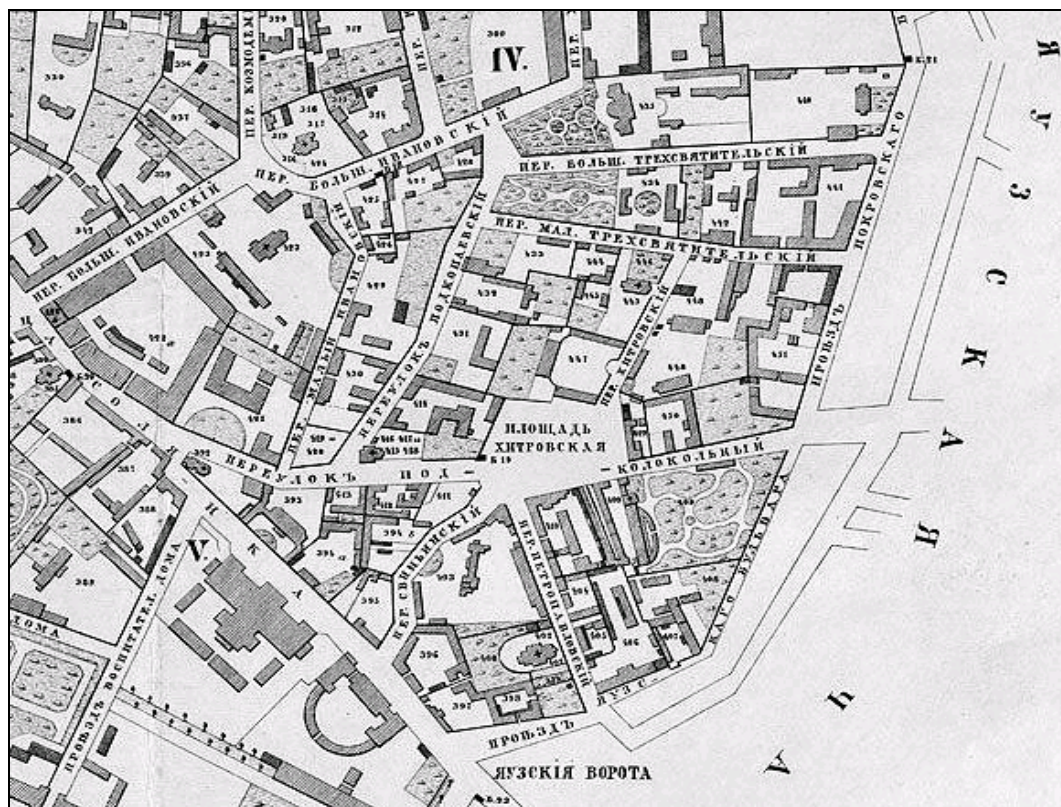
On this forum, a lot has already been said and shown about [the Moscow district] Khitrovka, and I am not going to add anything, but I can't help discussing [a certain character's] house. Staniukovich in his book supposed (but did not insist) that she lived at number 10 on Yauzskii Boulevard. The house he mentions looks like this:



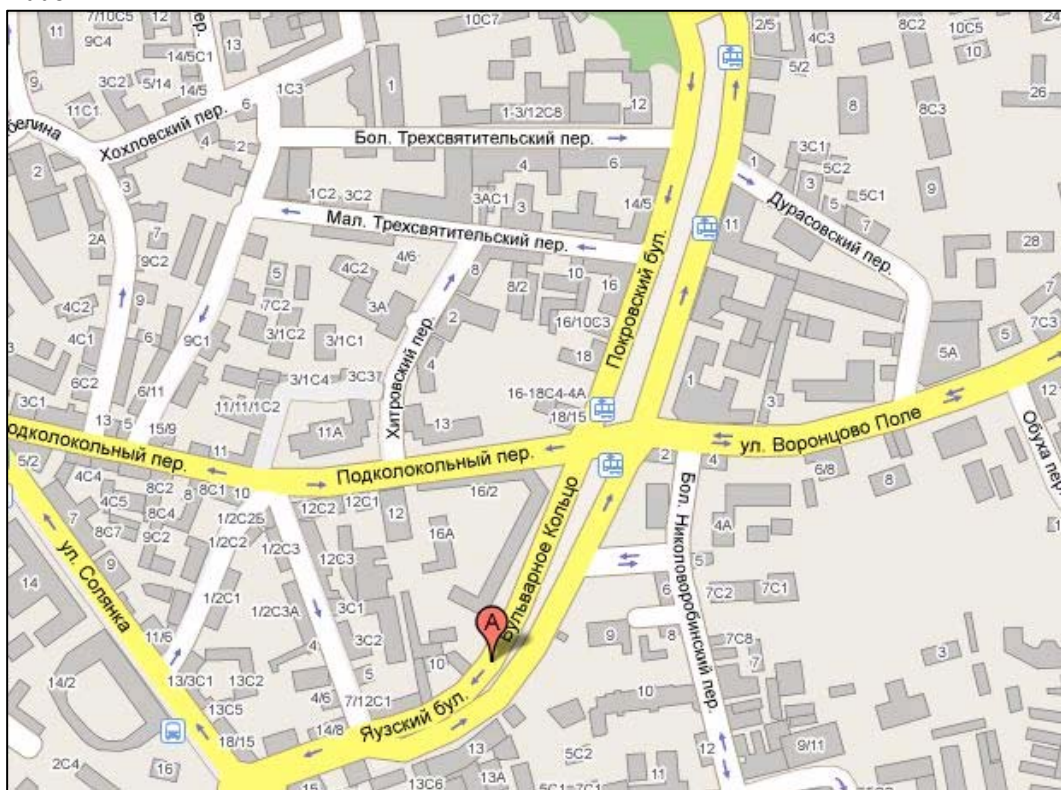
It really faces Yauzskii Boulevard with four windows, but on the level of the second and third floor.

On maps of Khitrovka in different years, it looked like this:

1850



2008



What else do we know about this house?

[The question is followed by several quotes from Akunin's *Liubovnika Smerti* [She Lover of Death, 2001] – EC]

It seems that everything really leads to number 10. And the entrance door faces East, and at that time it was possible to see it from the end of Pokrovskii Boulevard. Only, in the maps it is clearly visible that at the point where one boulevard meets the other, there is no bend. Maybe the Author was following the map from 1881 [...]. On this map there is a bend between the boulevards, but house number 10 is not visible. [it appears that the map from 1881 was posted at this point, but it is no longer visible – EC] (B. 18/09/2008).<sup>15</sup>

While certainly not all readers will become involved in such thorough research, this user's efforts demonstrate how Akunin's work generates deep historical and topographical speculations, like a treasure hunt in which willing readers can participate if they are passionate enough about history, geography and literature. Through Akunin's work and through the readiness of his readers to partake in the author's game and engage in cultural research, even a genre like the detective novel, generally perceived as 'low', can generate such erudite discussion. Readers who are also active internet users can share this knowledge with other fans, while those who would not endeavour in such detailed research can find useful information on the forum thanks to other users (and not just in book). These efforts are received with enthusiasm and gratitude by other users:

B., I am so grateful for the photographs and for such interesting information! Now walking around the centre of Moscow will be twice as interesting! (F. 06/10/2008).<sup>16</sup>

What one user creates, discovers and shares becomes a precious source of knowledge for other readers, who in turn might provide original information at other times. The *Fandorin!* community, like other fan communities, works therefore as a 'knowledge community', based on 'collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations and fantasies in response to various artefacts of popular culture', and turns the forum into a space where 'knowledge culture meets popular culture' (Jenkins 2006a).

Furthermore, forum users note that Akunin has a tendency to seemingly 'mix' spaces, for example situating a building (which he describes accurately) at a different address than the one where it is actually located, leaving his readers to guess which house is the one he is describing in a given passage. Readers use the forum to share their findings and guesses about the exact location of buildings. After an exchange between two users about a particular building, one of them concludes:

This means that once again the author has presented us with a collage: in Moscow, there is no Trekhsviatskii Street with a marble mansion, and there never was; however there

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=15090fd62badccc1c559865cdf3e6b0d&threadid=4525&page=15&pagenumber=3> (accessed 1 February 2011)

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=15090fd62badccc1c559865cdf3e6b0d&threadid=4525&page=15&pagenumber=3> (accessed 1 February 2011)



was and there is a tenement house between Tverskoi boulevard and Malaia Nikitskaia. (E. 06/01/2009).<sup>17</sup>

The territorialisation of Fandorin's locations is further enhanced by a forum member, who suggests that users post their pictures to a photography website, called *Panoramio*, which periodically selects pictures for Google Earth. This initiative underlines how the activity of the forum is not isolated, and how forum members are eager to use other websites to enrich their experience and to spread Akunin-inspired knowledge throughout the Web. The thread opens with the inviting words:

Do you love Moscow (or London) and are you quite good at photography? Do you read Akunin and know every building mentioned in his books? Do you even keep photographs of Fandorin's places? Now you have the possibility to show them to the whole world! (Bkh. 18/03/2007).<sup>18</sup>

The thread quickly becomes one of the primary areas of the forum where Fandorin's places are compared with contemporary places; moreover, it illustrates how collaboration is a strong element of online communication. Collaboration between users represents an important part of the initiative, uniting users in the common purpose of taking pictures and posting them to *Panoramio*.

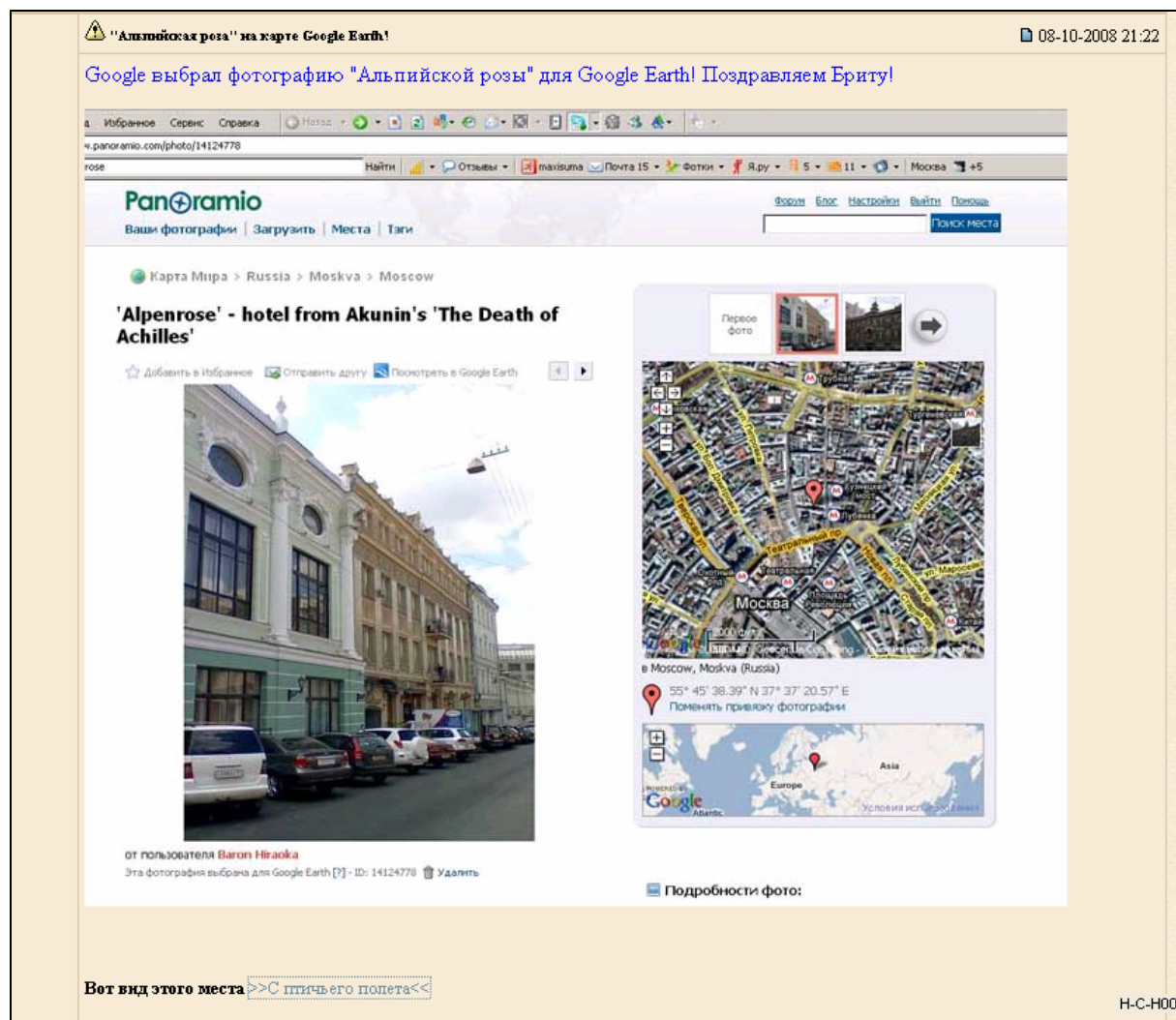
The Google Earth initiative proved to be quite successful as some pictures from users of *Fandorin!* were actually selected for Google Earth (see Figure 4), where their caption notes that these places appear in Akunin's novels, therefore linking the writer's work to that particular place for Google Earth users as well as for Akunin's readers. Thanks to activities like the walk around Fandorin's places, the exchange of pictures and information on Moscow's topography and the Google Earth initiative, the literary experience of a fan of Akunin's who is involved online can move back and forth from the printed page of the novel to the virtual world of the website, and further to the 'real' world of known places.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=15090fd62badccc1c559865cdf3e6b0d&threadid=4525&page=15&pagenumber=5> (accessed 1 February 2011)

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=119519d60132d2eadcd545c5ee06c88b&threadid=4525> (accessed 1 February 2011).

**Figure 4.** One of Fandorin's places on Google Earth.



Source: <http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=119519d60132d2eadcd545c5ee06c88b&threadid=4525&perpage=15&pagenumber=3> (accessed 31 January 2011).

## Conclusion

As these examples have shown, the traditional literary text which still utilises the book as its primary support can be experienced online, by being re-elaborated by readers who interact both with the text and with other readers. The transition from the traditional medium of the book to the new media of the internet requires the reader to engage with both the printed text and the website, allowing for a dynamic experience of reading mediated through digital tools.

Manifestations of literary passion, which of course existed before the internet, are now expressed through contemporary tools, such as blogs, self-publication websites, discussion forums and social networks, through which tendencies inherent to internet usage (interactivity, collaboration among users through computer-mediated communication, users as producers of original materials and meanings) intermingle with readers' literary and cultural interests. Communication between fans of literature can become a useful tool for them to deepen

their own literary passion through exchange with other members of the fan community. Online tools can help spread literary knowledge, while online forms of communication can be used to reinforce individual opinions and interests through the sharing of information and opinions with like-minded users, including book enthusiasts.

The interactive world of the internet offers new possibilities to established writers, too. Like many other contemporary authors, Boris Akunin takes advantage of the internet to increase his visibility. At a superficial level, his official website appears to be very static, as it does not contain any explicit information or possibility for users to interact with its contents or with each other. However, it is clearly inspired by the historical atmosphere of the *Fandorin* novels. It can, therefore, stimulate readers to engage with the time setting of the stories, through the graphic choices and the visualisation of objects typical of the time of the novels. Thanks to the links between past and present, the website does not simply represent an archive, but allows its visitors to play with their understanding of the texts.

Akunin's fans have also created online communities around their passion for his books. On the *Fandorin!* website, users spontaneously engage in research about Fandorin's places, share information about them or even visit them in person, while always keeping in mind that there is a time shift between what they see and the way it appeared or what it represented at the time when Fandorin's adventures are set. Akunin's work is particularly apt to foster further research, because of the high number of stimulations it contains thanks to the literary and cultural reference it offers and to the parallels that can be established between different historical times.

The way in which readers connect past and present locations thanks to photography and meticulous historical, geographical and topographical research attributes a realistic dimension to the novels and to their protagonist. In this way, readers can continue the 'game' created by the author in his books, which relies on cultural references, including the juxtaposition of the time of the novels with the present. On the author's suggestion, readers take their experience of the novels out of the pages of the book, and relate it to the contemporary world and to their surroundings, with the help of other readers with whom they share an interest for Akunin's historical subjects. Time and space work as explicit links between the novels and the online experience, and allow the interested reader to use the internet to engage with literature in an active way, both at the individual level and through sharing. Through engagement with time and space, the reading experience of a fan of Akunin's books who is involved online travels back and forth from the printed page of the book to the virtual page of the website and becomes explicit in space through personal visits (or through the shared tales of these visits) to relevant places. The *Fandorin!* website is representative of the intersection between internet culture and reading culture, and provides an excellent example of digital remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999) of literary consumption, which might become a more significant phenomenon as more of the world becomes connected.

Therefore, online involvement is for these readers not a distracting element drawing them away from the book, but rather a consequence of traditional reading and an added possibility for readers to engage with other fans of the same author. To participate actively in the initiatives of the website, one has to know Akunin's books and have a certain degree of passion for them. The internet is used as a tool through which readers exchange impressions and information after the individual experience has taken place and has been interiorised, thus cre-

ating the possibility for a collective reading experience and forming knowledge communities where information is produced and shared. Literary passion becomes for these readers a starting point: through the forum, they elevate their experience beyond the two levels of text and virtual and incorporate it in their 'real' life. Literary discussion is of course not an exclusively digital activity: however, modern readers who are involved online take advantage of the possibilities offered by the characteristics of the online medium to exchange materials and organise real-life meetings. This experience would not be complete without the participation of a wide group of readers to share information and create initiatives with, allowing the solitary experience of close reading to expand in other directions, virtual and collective, without losing any intensity.

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