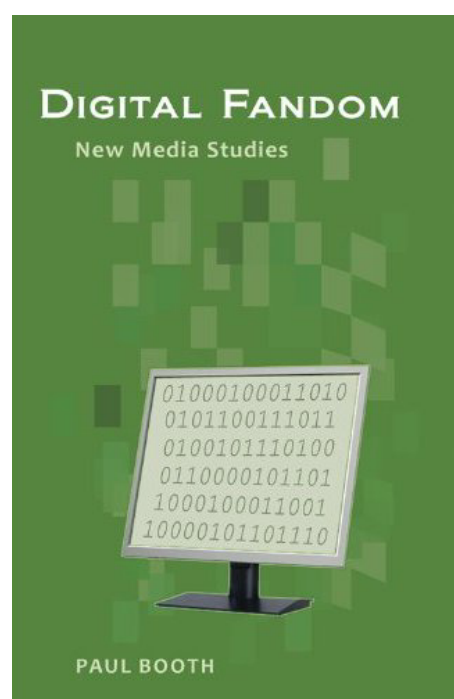


Reviews

Digital Fandom. New Media Studies. Paul Booth. Peter Lang. 2010. Paperback: 245 pages. ISBN: 978-1433110702. £ 20.30, English.

In this book on fandom in digital culture, it is Paul Booth's chief purpose to suggest a theoretical approach to fan studies that is specifically rooted in the study of new media. He finds media and culture studies theories alone inadequate for investigating fan practices in a new media environment. He argues for the augmentation of conventional studies of media fandoms through the examination of the influential role of the digital environment: 'It is "digital" fandom not because it assumes that there is some inherent deterministic difference in the way digital technology affects fans, but rather because many creative fan practices rely on the characteristics of the digital. By integrating digital scholarship into fan studies, I hope to provide a text that offers a unique view of contemporary audiences' (p. 5).

Key to this integration of digital scholarship in his study of fandom is Booth's recognition of the 'philosophy of playfulness' (p.2) or ludicity as its central feature. Other works before *Digital Fandom* have dwelt on the implicit ludic quality of fan interactions with text (Sandvoss and Penrod 2010), but Booth's book goes much further to suggest it is the defining principle of fan practices. Thus, Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) become for Booth a metaphor for the study of fandom by virtue of three of their defining principles: ARGs are a mash-up of the world of play and work (Eskelinen 2001), are an expansion of the 'magic circle' (Huizinga 1955) where game rules supersede the rules of the social order, and are a hypermediated environment where mediation is ubiquitous but also effaced through the player's immersion in the game (McGonigal 2003). For Booth, ARGs are, by extension, a metaphor for contemporary media culture where boundaries are effaced between work and play, text and intertext, narrative and interactivity, real and virtual, gift and commodity economies, and the immediate and hypermediate. In his specific focus on digital fandom, he argues that like ARGs, digital fandom operates in this transmedial, liminal world. And so, Booth attests, there are no producers and consumers, but only participants.



Based on a specific examination of cult television fandoms (presumably because they show a level of commitment and participation other fans do not), the book's seven chapters focus on various kinds of fan practices as they unfold on platforms such as blogs and wikis. In Chapters Two and Three ('Digital Fandom between Work and Text' and 'Intra-Textuality and Battlestar Blogs', respectively), analysing fan fiction blogs as an example, Booth proposes that the fan blog is not just intertextual but a product of the dialogue between the individual author and the community of readers. The fan fiction blog is therefore *intratextual* because the larger fandom, and not a single fan, is the author of fan fiction blogs. Fan fiction keeps developing intratextually, a product of the post and the discussions that follow.

In the next two chapters ('The Narrative Database and the Web Commons' and 'Narrativity and Spoilers'), Booth proposes the term 'narrativity' to describe the process by which communal interactive action constructs and develops a narrative structure in fan wikis. This is especially the case for cult television shows which have narrative arcs. The fan wikis set up in response to the shows have a complexity that matches the televisual texts; they are 'complete archives of narrative information' (p. 81). In addition, the inherent hypertextuality of the web means elements of a narrative can be linked in new ways. Taking exception to Lev Manovich's pronouncement that the database and narrative are 'natural enemies' (Manovich 2001: 225), Booth proposes that wikis are a 'narrative database' (pp. 88-89). Narrative suggests closure and database suggests an ongoing process, but the 'narrative database' suggests both closure and openness because it continues to hold information that can be used for rewritings even as it presents new cohesion to what it collates. The narrative and the database work seamlessly together in the world of digital fandom.

Subsequently, in 'Interreality and the Digi-Gratis' and in 'Identity Replay on Myspace', Booth dwells on the blurring of boundaries between the real and virtual in social network sites. MySpace, he argues, offers digital fandom an *interreality*, a third space of fan creation. On MySpace fans create a new form of interreal textual space, open to user interpretation and play. Here, there is space for two types of virtual identity to be played with: the fan persona, where fans adopt alternative identities for themselves, but also alternative character persona developed on the basis of the television show's protagonists. Such identity role play allows fans to rewrite a media text's characters on MySpace by creating profiles for characters and taking the narrative forward in these characters' purported MySpace interactions with fans. This also reproduces fan community in these interreal spaces. MySpace is also an example of the mash up of two economies, the market economy of production and the gift economy of shared exchange, which Booth argues is characteristic of digital fandoms. Where fandom studies tend to view fan economies as gift economies opposed to the commodity economy, Booth says it is a combination of both and coins the term 'digi-gratis economy' to convey this convergence.

Booth concludes by elaborating, in 'Digital Fandom, Alternate Reality Games, and Demediation', on the centrality of 'demediation' to user experiences of ARGs and digital fandom. While David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) offer 'remediation' to suggest a process whereby one medium borrows from, learns from, and refashions an older medium, Booth finds this term inadequate in an age of users' participative and immersive experiences of media convergence. He suggests, instead, 'demediation' as a process whereby media are both vital *and* rendered invisible in a user's experience. Therefore Bolter and Grusin's binary

positioning of hypermediacy (the explicit presence of the medium in a user's experience) and immediacy (the erasure of that medium from the experience and the user's immersion in the message or content) seems unable to capture the nature of user experiences of fan platforms, and indeed ARGs. ARGs, rather, 'demediate' real life by 'reversing and surpassing the polarity of hypermediacy and immediacy' (p.7, p. 186). Similarly, fan immersion in a text is complete with their ability to use new technologies to develop characters and narratives according to their own preferences; yet the medium of the web is consciously used and is vital to the fan experience of immersion. Clearly, we need to develop new ways of studying the specific impact of digital technology on fan practices.

The principles of transmediality, media 'flow', convergence and their impact on authorship and other aspects of user participation and creativity equally underpin new media practices in the region of Russia, Eurasia and Central Europe. Implicitly acknowledged in every issue of *Digital Icons*, it is also the subject of a special issue devoted exclusively to this theme (see Issue 5. *Transmedial Practices in Post-Communist Spaces*). Booth's arguments therefore resonate beyond the world of the American fan (the *raison d'être* of his work) and beyond the epicentre of fandom studies that is American academia.

Booth's main contribution lies in that *Digital Fandom* provides us with a useful if, at times, awkward vocabulary ('narrativity' is particularly a mouthful) to speak of the liminality of fan practices in the specific context of a new media environment. His use of the ARG metaphor and his coinage of terms such as, among others, the digi-gratis economy are helpful in conveying the 'betwixt and between' nature of fan cultures. Fandom's transmediality in new media cultures and their experience of television from a liminal vantage point – between immediacy and hypermediacy – have been implicitly or explicitly addressed in other works on fandom and audiences (Jenkins 2006, Hill 2002, Holmes and Jermyn 2004, Mathijs and Jones 2004). But Booth's important submission to the debate is that he goes much further to situate fandom theory specifically in a new media environment by offering an amalgam of approaches from game and fandom studies. This is in contrast to other works on fandom (cited above) that have neglected to consider the specific role of new media technologies in enhancing these inherent qualities of fan practices. Further, and not unimportantly, this is also an eminently readable book. *Digital Fandom* is an extremely useful addition to personal and professional libraries of not only fans and those with a disciplinary interest in new media, but also scholars inclined to do fandom research in Russia, Eurasia and Central Europe.

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