

# Fan Fiction, Remix Culture, and the Potter Games

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## *Introduction*

The dynamic interplay of literature, literacy, and technology is evident in how youth engage with J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*. Young fans use online affinity spaces related to young adult literature to deepen their understanding of the narrative structures and themes. At the same time, these spaces encourage their creative responses to literature. Around the world, fans are writing *Harry Potter*-based and *Hunger Games*-inspired stories, creating art, producing videos, composing music, and designing role-playing games. Fans draw on a variety of modes, semiotic resources, and literacy practices throughout this process. By actively participating in affinity spaces around a shared passion, young people have an authentic audience who reads, responds to, and even critiques their creative work.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter draws on my ethnographic research of adolescent literacy, online affinity spaces, and young adult literature. Affinity space ethnography is a powerful methodology that can shed light on the culture of physical, virtual, and blended spheres that adolescents inhabit.<sup>2</sup> In particular, affinity space ethnography affords access to participants around the world, a readily available web-based historical record of the affinity space's practices, and a way to trace adolescent literacy practices across sites, texts, and discourses. As part of an affinity space ethnography, I explored how youth, ages 11 to 17, in the United States, Canada, and Australia engaged with *The Hunger Games*. Cassie (a pseudonym) was one participant in the study, and this chapter analyzes her experience with writing fan fiction based on *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*.

With fan fiction, fans take the characters or settings from an original work, such as a book or film, and incorporate them into a creative story. In this respect, fan fiction and remix culture can support how young people read and respond to literature. Drawing on my ethnographic research of online affinity spaces, I analyzed Cassie's writing process as she remixed the characters *Harry Potter* and settings from *The Hunger Games*. As an avid participant in *The Hunger Games* affinity space, Cassie was invited to contribute to *The Potter Games*, an online choose-your-own adventure game. She was assigned the character of Colin Creevey, who was one of 24 *Harry Potter* characters within *The Potter Games*.

In order to write her story, Cassie chose to closely analyze ten novels, create a character study, and critically consider how to use language and literary techniques within her remixed story. Each *Potter Games* writer had their own process and final product. Cassie's writing process was shaped by her prior school experiences and her experience within *The Hunger Games* affinity space. I argue that her motivation to engage in creative writing is closely linked to her passion for young adult literature as well as the availability of having an authentic audience for her work. For researchers and educators, this raises new questions about the role of motivation in shaping young people's literacy development. In the following sections, I consider the relationship among young adult literature, fan fiction, and remix culture.

### *Young Adult Literature*

According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center, recent years have seen a marked increase in the number of novels published for young adults, particularly in the science fiction and fantasy genre.<sup>3</sup> This includes *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* as well as *Divergent*, *Matched*, *Delirium*, *Twilight*, *Uglies*, and *The Knife of Never Letting Go*. These novels are often set in the future, in a parallel world, or in a historical past. They may feature characters that are wizards, mutants, robots, or genetically engineered humans. Within this genre, readers may encounter novel scientific principles, technological advancements, political systems, and social cultures.

Suzanne Collins' dystopian trilogy includes *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay*, initially published between 2008 and 2010. Set in a post-apocalyptic world, Panem is an affluent capitol, surrounded by thirteen impoverished districts. In the Dark Days, the districts rose up against the Capitol; twelve districts were defeated and one was obliterated. To remind the citizens of Panem that such a revolution must never happen again, they are subjected to the Hunger Games each year. Each of the districts must pro-

vide two tributes, one boy and one girl, to participate. Over a period of several weeks, the tributes fight to the death. The Hunger Games is televised throughout Panem, from the glittering streets of the capitol to the coal mining towns. The protagonist, sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen, must decide whether to kill or be killed — and later, whether to lead a revolution.

*Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* offer young people the opportunity to immerse themselves in new worlds. From Voldemort's quest for power to Panem's effort to suppress rebellion, fans ask themselves, "What do power and privilege mean? How can someone make an impossible choice? Is violence ever justified?" These questions often turn inward, as readers contemplate their own lived experiences, beliefs, and values. In this way, literary response involves both reading the word and reading the world.<sup>4</sup>

Jenkins argues that J.K. Rowling's richly detailed world provides youth with many points of entry to literature.

Some kids imagine themselves as related to the characters — the primary ones like Harry Potter or Snape, of course, but also minor background figures — the inventors of the Quidditch brooms, the authors of the textbooks, the heads of referenced agencies, classmates of Harry's mother and father, any affiliation that allows them to claim a special place for themselves in the story.<sup>5</sup>

Young people can put themselves into the story through writing and sharing fan fiction in online affinity spaces. Fan fiction, in this sense, provides a way *into* the story — and a point of entry to the *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Games* fandoms.

## *Fan Fiction*

Research on fan culture has examined how fans write stories, create art, produce songs, and engage in role-plays. In effect, these practices blur "any clear-cut distinction between media producer and media spectator, since any spectator may potentially participate in the creation of new artworks."<sup>6</sup> Online affinity spaces offer a way for young people to actively engage with this aspect of fan culture. In recent years, literacy scholars have considered how young fans use the characters, settings, and themes within popular culture texts as inspiration for their own creative work. Thomas' study, for instance, shows how fan fiction can promote collaborative writing and role-playing across a range of real-life and virtual spaces.<sup>7</sup> Black's research on Fan fiction.net highlights adolescent English language learners' process of writing anime-based stories.<sup>8</sup> She posits that their writing skills develop through peer review and by having a global audience of readers.

Fan fiction offers many opportunities for writers to engage with modes and genres. Magnifico's study of *Neopets*, a virtual pet site, demonstrates how some fans use identity profiles and role-plays to situate themselves in the world of Neopia. They can then take on the role of writers, editors, and artists for the *Neopian Times*, a weekly online newspaper.<sup>9</sup> Due to readily available digital tools, fan fiction is increasingly multimodal and hybrid.<sup>10</sup> In her research, Lammers shows how fans use visual representations of characters and settings from *The Sims* game to write stories. These are shared, critiqued, and revised within an online space.<sup>11</sup> Within online affinity spaces, fan fiction writing involves the interaction of semiotic resources and the public dissemination of creative work.

Affinity spaces offer new ways for fans to engage with young adult literature. These affinity spaces are not just created for young fans—they are also created *by* young fans. Jenkins' research on fan culture highlights how one *Harry Potter* fan launched *The Daily Prophet*, an online "school newspaper" for Hogwarts. At its peak, this young woman managed an international staff of over a hundred writers who produced fan fiction stories on everything from the latest Quidditch match to Muggle cuisine. Jenkins explains, "Heather personally edits each story, getting it ready for publication. She encourages her staff to closely compare their original submission with the edited versions and consults with them on issues of style and grammar as needed."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, online affinity spaces provide ways for fans to write, edit, design, and review stories. But fan fiction writing can also be understood within remix culture.

## *Remix Culture*

Remix is a practice of taking cultural artifacts and combining them in new and creative ways.<sup>13</sup> With the increasing availability of digital tools and online spaces, remixing has flourished in recent years. However, the practice of remixing literary texts is much older than the Internet. Pugh argues that the practice was evident in the 1400s, with Robert Henryson's sequels to some of Geoffrey Chaucer's poetry.<sup>14</sup> Today, Lessig sees remix as a core part of the secondary English curriculum.

You read a book by Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, you read a book by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night*, and then you take bits from each of these books and you put them together in an essay. You take and combine, and that's the writing, the creative writing, which constitutes education about writing: to take and to remix as a way of creating something new.<sup>15</sup>

Remix, in this sense, can be a cultural, a literary, and/or a digital practice. It involves taking artifacts (including paper-based artifacts like stories or digital

artifacts like images), combining them in new and provocative ways, and even adding in original content.<sup>16</sup> Online affinity spaces offer ways to readily disseminate remixes to a global audience.

Research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project indicates that 73 percent of adolescents use online social network sites and 64 percent participate in content-creating activities.<sup>17</sup> For many fans, social media allows them to engage in affinity spaces and share creative work, which may span any number of genres and modes. For example, fans have used characters from *The Sims* to illustrate their *Harry Potter*-based fan stories that are then posted on LiveJournal. Stein explains that fans used the home-based interactions inherent in *The Sims* to consider *Potter* characters' domestic lives. This emphasizes "the expansiveness of fan imagination rather than the limitations of canon."<sup>18</sup> When young fans engage in remix, their only limit is their imagination. While they may begin with literature like *The Hunger Games* or *Harry Potter*, they can draw on other texts and tools. Fan culture embraces both the process and the product of remixing, which is evident in fan fiction. In the following section, I share my research on fan culture and young adult literature.

### *Researching Literacy, Literature, and Fandom*

In my ethnographic study, data collection began with systematic observation to gain insight into the dynamics of communication and semiotic production in portals to the *Hunger Games* affinity space. Portals provide a way to access the affinity space, and include websites such as HungerGamesTrilogy.net, HungerGamesRPG.com, and Mockingjay.net. To delve deeper into the fan culture associated with *The Hunger Games*, I conducted multiple interviews with focal participants via Skype, email, or instant messenger. Since I was interested in understanding the factors that shaped their literacy development, I also examined artifacts. Because online affinity spaces are socially constructed, an analysis of artifacts can provide insight into the culture. I collected and analyzed artifacts such as codes of conduct, role-play game rules, online discussions, and social media posts as well as fan-created stories, videos, songs, and artwork.

In this chapter, I focus on a young woman named Cassie. She is sixteen years old and lives in the northeastern United States. At the suggestion of her middle school librarian, Cassie read *The Hunger Games* and was enthralled by the dystopian world of Panem, the brutality of the Hunger Games, and Katniss' quest for survival. Eager to discuss the novels with others, she turned to the Internet. Soon, Cassie discovered the ever-growing *Hunger Games* fan-

dom, and she took on the role as co-administrator on a popular fansite. In this role, she designs interactive features, creates videos, shares news, manages social media accounts, and participates in podcasts. Cassie has an active role within the affinity space; other fans may write stories, share artwork, participate in online discussions, or simply lurk as passive participants. She explains that the online *Hunger Games* fandom has changed her understanding of the trilogy, and “it allowed me to explore perspectives other than my own... I see more of the world that the author has created.” For Cassie, remixing the *Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter* was a powerful experience.

### *Writing Fan Fiction and Remixing Young Adult Literature*

Due to Cassie’s active involvement in *The Hunger Games* fandom, she has met many others who share her passion for young adult literature. In 2011, she was invited to contribute to *The Potter Games*, an online choose-your-own adventure game that situates *Harry Potter* characters within the *Hunger Games*. ThePotterGames.com is part of TheFandom.net. It was created by Adam Spunberg, Savanna New, Sam Cushion, and Shylah Addante, and currently overseen by Kait Silva and Natasha Baucas. Cassie had previously met Adam and Savanna through their involvement in *The Hunger Games Fireside Chat*, a popular podcast. Cassie shared, “I love writing! I think my love of writing helped me through this project, but the reason I participated in *The Potter Games* in the first place was because I thought it was a unique project. Having my writing included was incredible. It was so neat to be able to see that I’d contributed to a project of this magnitude that other fans enjoyed.”

Like all *Potter Games* writers, Cassie was assigned a specific character and required to use a choose-your-own adventure format, but she had total control of her writing process and her storyline. In order to remix *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*, Cassie had to build on textual evidence and consider how her assigned character, Colin Creevey, might change when he was put in life-threatening circumstances. Using a choose-your-own adventure storyline, Cassie wrote her story and included key choices that directly engaged her audience. If Colin is to survive the Hunger Games, what choices will he make? Will he betray his friends, sacrifice his principles, or commit violent acts? Cassie’s writing process shows how she drew on the original settings and characters as well as her command of language and genre to answer these questions.

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## *Drawing on Mentor Texts*

Like many writers before her, Cassie began by consulting mentor texts.<sup>19</sup> While mentor texts can provide writers with insight into a particular genre, they also offer expertly crafted examples of how another writer uses descriptive language, draws on literary techniques, and builds a narrative arc. For Cassie, these mentor texts were written by J.K. Rowling and Suzanne Collins. She initially reviewed all *Harry Potter* books in order to learn more about Colin Creevey as a character. Cassie explained, “He isn’t mentioned much in the books, so I tried to take the motivations for things that he did in the *Harry Potter* books and create a bit of a background story for him. This character, with the filled-in background, was the one that I used in the *Potter Games*.” Since Colin wasn’t a main character in the *Harry Potter* books, writing a fan fiction story required that Cassie use her imagination and her artistic license.

Cassie began her story as Colin prepared to risk his life in the Hunger Games. At the Cornucopia, waiting for the Games to start, Colin was surrounded by his friends. Cassie chose to use the second person to draw her readers into the story and help them identify with Colin.

Standing on a small platform, trying to stay as still as possible for the seconds that you must wait before you are free to enter the arena, you look around you at the other tributes. You can’t focus on the tense goodbye you said to your stylists and mentor, or the moment you waited in the hovercraft, feeling your heart skip a beat as you realized maybe you wanted to die early; save your parents the grieving. Of course, as you stand on the platform, you look across at the other tributes, from Harry Potter to Cedric to Cormac, the Quidditch players who constantly inspire you at school with their athleticism and utter wizardry. The way you looked up to them was the same way your brother looks up to you. If you need to try for anyone, you need to try for your brother and the future of the world.

While Cassie drew on *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* as mentor texts, she was also aware that she was writing her own story.

In order to situate Colin in the Hunger Games, Cassie had to develop his identity and his background story. “I did try to keep his main morals and values, but filling him in really gave me insight to the type of alliances he might make and the type of things he might do once put into the Hunger Games,” she stated. “After all, the Hunger Games are a fight-to-the-death situation, and the goal of the character writer is to create separate paths, including victory paths and dead ends.” The genre of a choose-your-own-adventure story is perfectly suited to this endeavor. Cassie saw herself as a character writer, and she knew that she was remixing *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*. Because of the genre, the task, and the audience, Cassie realized from the onset that she had specific writing goals.

## *The Process of Writing and Remixing*

Drawing on her prior school-based experiences, Cassie set several writing goals for herself. Cassie shared that her first goal was to create a victory path for Colin Creevey. While he may be an unlikely victor of the Hunger Games, Cassie knew that if it were to happen, she would need to embrace his strongest traits. Based on her analysis of *Harry Potter*, she believed that Colin would be good at hiding. In the Hunger Games arena, if Colin could camouflage, he might outlive his enemies. But Cassie thought that hiding wouldn't be enough and Colin would "have to be a bit tougher at some points." She imagined how devastated Colin would be at the prospect of hearing of Harry's death — let alone being responsible for it.

Cassie concluded that she would need to have Colin confront this weakness, and she did so by making Harry and Ron seem uncharacteristically heartless. She reflected, "Who knows what would have made Harry and Ron become mean in the arena. I was just writing for Colin, and I needed him to toughen up by having them be tougher." *The Potter Games* offers readers 24 stories, written by different authors; for that reason, Cassie's characterization of Colin, Harry, and Ron was different from other writers' portrayal of them.

By developing Colin's character — and showing some unsavory sides of Harry and Ron's characters — Cassie laid the groundwork for her story. As she remixed *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*, she drew on textual details, including spells from the wizarding world and lethal "mutations" from the Hunger Games arena. Cassie found that these details added to the authenticity of her story. However, since her audience was avid fans of both series, she strived for accuracy. She shared, "I would check my books or the *Harry Potter* encyclopedia to make sure I had the details right." In this respect, Cassie used mentor texts as well as other resources to remix the two worlds. Even though she wrote her story by herself, she was keenly aware of her prospective audience.

At one point in her story, Cassie puts Colin in an impossible situation: he must kill or be killed. In both *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*, this was not an unfamiliar situation for the characters. But it was one that Colin had never faced — at least not in this way.

You and Harry are now the last two standing. You decide to walk where you think he will be: the camp where he allied with and then abandoned you. For better or for worse, you must now face him and put an end to these Games. You must fight Harry Potter.

Harry Potter. The Boy Who Lived. The Chosen One. Your friend. Your mentor. Your idol.

*Was your idol*, you think bitterly. Over the course of these Games, you have seen a different side of Harry. You would have never expected him to need saving ...



or abandon a friend. You reach the camp, and find Harry standing there. He is bloody and burned, but his wand isn't drawn. More than anything else, he just looks tired.

As a writer, Cassie knew that she needed to craft two paths for Colin, which she conceptualized as “a victory path and a dead end.” In order for Colin to win the Hunger Games, he must kill Harry Potter. To make this an easier choice for him, Cassie had previously depicted some of Harry's less-than-enviable traits. But at this moment, she also made the audience sympathetic toward Harry's plight. As a choose-your-own-adventure story, the audience had full control of the denouement. Will Colin murder Harry and emerge victorious from the Hunger Games? Or will he remain loyal to Harry and sacrifice his own life?

### *Writing for an Authentic Audience*

As a writer, Cassie used mentor texts and literary resources as well as rich language and literary techniques to craft Colin's story. When *The Potter Games* was released in 2011, it was marketed within online affinity spaces, including on fansites and through social media. Youth from both the *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* fandoms eagerly read — and critiqued — *The Potter Games*. Cassie recalled, “Some of the Facebook fans didn't like it because they said the main trio was too out-of-character. However, I wanted to make Colin become a whole different person, to grow into someone who saw his own strengths.” As an avid reader of J.K. Rowling's books, Cassie knew that Colin couldn't just outright murder Harry, Ron, or Hermione. As she put it, “He had to have some change in perspective about them.” By making them more heartless, and consequently, less sympathetic to readers, Cassie was able to craft a scenario in which Colin truly had the choice whether or not to murder Harry.

Through *The Potter Games*, Cassie had an opportunity to share her writing with a public audience. Within the first nine months of its release, *The Potter Games* had been visited half a million times and had 40,000 Facebook likes. Released just before *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part Two*, *The Potter Games* was poised to draw readers from two burgeoning fan cultures. Cassie felt it was an incredible honor to be asked to contribute Colin's story. As a fan herself, she knew that her readers would be smart, be concerned about authenticity, and have high expectations of any *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Games* remix. As a writer, Cassie was motivated by the opportunity to learn from mentor texts penned by J.K. Rowling and Suzanne Collins. She specifically talked about her goals as a writer, and she readily drew on resources that existed within the fandoms and affinity spaces. Moreover, Cassie was eager

to share her work with a global audience. Through the process of remixing, Cassie deepened her knowledge of the *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Games* canons at the same time that she honed her craft as a writer.

### *Implications for Teachers*

In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts warned of a marked decline in adolescents' engagement with literature. *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* contrasted books with digital media and argued that the latter "often require no more than passive participation" and "foster shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification."<sup>20</sup> In contrast, scholars have argued that digital literacy practices are more participatory, collaborative, and distributed than conventional print-based literacy practices.<sup>21</sup> My ethnographic research on online affinity spaces suggests that remixing can be an opportunity for young people like Cassie to critically engage with young adult literature and develop their writing skills.

Today, youth are no longer limited to primarily writing for their teachers in school settings.<sup>22</sup> With online fan communities, they can (and do) write for greater audiences. Young people's interest in and skills around fan culture are a valuable resource for teachers. In particular, fan fiction can be a way to "reposition some adolescents as capable literacy learners."<sup>23</sup> Many young people readily watch movies and television shows and read books, comics, and graphic novels. Fan culture, in many ways, encourages young people to shift from being passive consumers to active producers. Online affinity spaces offer multiple ways that fans can connect with others, share creative work, and remix cultural artifacts.

Agee argues, "How high school teachers approach literature sends messages to their students not only about what kinds of literature are valued but also who is valued."<sup>24</sup> Young adult literature, including *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*, offers a way *into* the curriculum for many students. Motivation has a tremendous (and often underestimated) impact on literacy. Through young adult literature, students can immerse themselves in new worlds and critically engage with words, ideas, and themes. Fan fiction offers an opportunity for them to respond to literature by remixing characters, settings, and events. They can make the story their own in new and exciting ways, and share their work with a global audience. Bean and Moni add that both accomplished and struggling students need opportunities to make personal and intertextual connections with young adult literature.<sup>25</sup> By valuing the practices of writing, designing, and remixing, teachers can bring fan culture into the classroom in new and powerful ways.

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