FANDOM AND BEYOND: ONLINE COMMUNITY, CULTURE, AND KEVIN SMITH FANDOM

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Abstract

Fan studies literature has frequently been pervaded by the prevailing assumptions of what constitutes "fans" and their associated activities: fan art or fantext, cosplay, conjecture, activism – the things that fans supposedly *do* by definition – are those to which scholarly attention has most been paid. Yet the assumption that fandom can be defined by such explicit practices can be dangerous because of the subjective nature of respective fan cultures. Presenting a fan culture that questions the "assumed" nature of fandom and fan practices, this thesis is an examination of the fans of filmmaker and comedian Kevin Smith, investigating the ways in which community members negotiate and categorise their fandom and relationships with both each other and a communicative, media-literate producer.

Since 1995, the View Askew Message Board has provided a dialogical, communicative platform for fans of Kevin Smith to define themselves as a collective group – or more frequently – a community. Through autoethnographic discussion, as well as qualitative research conducted both online and in person, this examination of users of the Board considers the nature of audience-producer relations, the intersection between on- and offline fannish and communal practices, and the extent to which the identity of "Kevin Smith fan" can be attributed within alternate contexts of fan productivity and (non) communal practice.

Contextualised by ongoing scholar-fan debate (Hills 2002; Gray et al. 2011), this thesis interrogates notions of fan practice, community, and classification, proposing further methodological and ethical considerations of the research of both explicit and implicit "fannish" practices. Through a netnographic framework (Kozinets 2010), this thesis is able to present a participatory approach to the study of online cultures, looking at how producer and fans simultaneously inhabit and inform the same cultural sphere, and how such practices help to inform a community's perception of their own fan culture.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Acknowledgements

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dedicate this thesis to her.

Introduction

Beyond Fandom and Fan Practice?

During the 2012 event "Popular Media Cultures: Writing in the Margins and Reading Between the Lines",[1] Henry Jenkins presented his paper 'Beyond Poaching: From Resistant Audiences to Fan Activism', a discussion on how fan activism as participatory practice could draw on older debates on fan cultures' ability to incite "real change". During the talk, Jenkins made reference to the "1992 moment" in fandom scholarship, the year when a number of significant works in the field were published that 'set the stage for more than a decade of fan … studies' (Busse and Hellekson 2006: 19). Since that time, citing Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*, Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women*, and/or Lisa Lewis' collection *The Adoring Audience* has seemingly been a matter of course in academic practice, as these works have collectively (albeit justly) shaped the nature of fan studies scholarship. The importance of the "1992 moment" means that frequently studies of fandom open with an account of their relation to these texts – *Textual Poachers* in particular (Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Booth 2010) – and the irony of doing the same here is not lost.

The title of Jenkins' 2012 work – '*Beyond* Poaching' – suggests that a re-evaluation, or at the very least a re-contextualisation, of the "1992 moment" is perhaps warranted. Bertha Chin, for example, begins her 2010 PhD thesis with a suggestion that the work of Jenkins and Bacon-Smith is too narrow for

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[1] Hosted by the Centre for Cultural and Creative Research, University of Portsmouth, and held at Odeon Cinema, Covent Garden, London 19/05/12.

the parameters of her study, conceiving of fans as "gifters" rather than "poachers". Yet what is clear is that studies that place themselves in relation to practices of poachers frequently do so to build, rather than refute, Jenkins' work, such as Matt Hills' notion of the "pre-textual poaching" of *Doctor Who* spoiler fans (2010: 72). Even with cultural changes such as the proliferation of online fandom prompting a shift from a "weekend-only world" (Jenkins 1992: 287) to one of everyday routine (Théberge 2005), the discursive mantras of fan studies appear to place textual poaching – or at least some form of fan practice involving the text – as a default position. For example, Susan Clerc notes:

> … although [computer-mediated-communication] has increased the amount of contact between fans and producers, it has not changed the essence of fan activities. Analysis, interpretation, and speculation, building a community through shared texts and playfully appropriating them for their own ends – these are the defining features of fandom both online and off. Fans are fans because they engage in these practices. (1996: 51)

However, it is a misstep to make such general assumptions. Here Clerc is relying on stereotypical conventions of fan cultures and fan productivities, assuming that all fan cultures operate in the same manner. The assumption of fandom necessarily assumes a shared conceptualisation of what constitutes fans and their associated activities – a dangerous assumption to make because of the subjective nature of respective fan cultures. Presenting a fan culture that questions the "assumed" nature of fandom and fan practices, this thesis is an examination of the little-studied fan culture surrounding American filmmaker and comedian Kevin Smith, investigating the ways in which participants negotiate and categorise their fandom and online relationships with both each other and a communicative, media-literate producer.

Beginning with his debut feature film *Clerks* (1994), Smith's writing and directing initially attracted attention from audiences as part of his "View Askewniverse" series (named for his production company View Askew). Spanning a further five films (*Mallrats* 1995; *Chasing Amy* 1997; *Dogma* 1999; *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* 2001; and *Clerks II* 2006), an animated series (*Clerks: The Animated Series* 2000) and various comic book spinoffs, the comedic dialogue-driven Askewniverse series was drawn together by the recurring appearance of stoner duo Jay and Silent Bob (the latter played by Smith), who became Smith's most famous characters.

The comedic tone of this work has translated into his off-screen presence, and Smith has transposed the expletive-ridden content of the filmic dialogue into his everyday media output. Audiences are able to see this output in Q&A comedy shows performed around the world (selling out venues from Carnegie Hall to the Sydney Opera House), or listening to one of the many recordings across his own SModcast podcast network, comprising around 30 different shows and a live broadcast stream. Smith's informal approach to the mediation of his public image, such as his frequent use of profanity (Zeitchik 2010), or the explicit detailing of his sexual relationship with his wife Jennifer Schwalbach (Smith 2007; 2009a) demonstrates a repeated discourse of openness, and his prolific media ventures provide an outlet to communicate with his fans on a more interpersonal level, for as Smith himself notes:

> [T]here's a whole portion of the audience who aren't fans of the flicks as much as they are supporters of me, personally. How does that happen? Well, I spend inordinate amounts of time at my company's website, interacting with people who like the flicks, and beyond that, I do panels at three or four big comic book conventions and numerous college Q&A's per year. This gives anyone who's even remotely interested in

my bullshit ample opportunity to get to know the real me (or, at least the "me" I present). (2005: 108).

Smith's knowing engagement with his fans (Miller 2003) is an interesting relationship worthy of study because of the way it purports to be particularly "close". Subsequently the nature of Smith-fan relations is often highlighted in audiences' reasoning of their Smith fandom, and in Smith's attitudes towards his fans. For instance, Smith notes that 'In a weird way, they get to live vicariously through me, since I'm the tubby kid who made it good, who comes across less like an artist and more like your buddy who suddenly won the lottery of life.' (Smith 2009b) This "buddy" status has been cultivated and maintained since Smith's initiation of a message board in 1995, providing a space where his enthusiasts can collate online. The View Askew Message Board, commonly referred to as simply "the Board", has since been the official online space for Smith-fan interactivity, and the fans that inhabit the space – and their practices – will be the subject of this thesis. It is undoubtedly the Board that is the most visibly interactive portal for Smith's fans, and holds significance as the only of Smith's websites which requires a fee to join,[2] ensuring 'the assholes, trolls and flamers who populate the dark corners of the internet, armed to the teeth with bitterness, envy, and a lot of free time' have no opportunity to post unconstructive negative feedback, and that members' 'license to post, quite like [their] license to drive ... is a privilege, not a right.'[3] Through three sections respectively covering online practice, offline practice, and inter-"fan" hierarchies this thesis will explore the extent to which

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[2] A one-off $2 non-refundable charity donation.
[3] As noted on the "Registration for the View Askew WWWBoard" page, http://viewaskew.com/theboard/register.html.

"fandom" is an appropriate term for the study of such a culture, and how far

beyond being "just" fans participants conceive themselves.

Sharing an email he drafted prior to the launch of the Board, Smith

demonstrates his active role in planning a web presence that would maximise

interaction between himself and fans:

> [The site would have a] section that we can update weekly that's all
> gossip about the industry – not necessarily about what we're doing, but
> what the studios are doing. We're tapped into the system, so we find
> stuff out long before it sees print ... I think people would dig that sort of
> thing. I know I would. ... And most importantly – once a week, I'd like
> to do a chat-room thing, where I can get on and answer questions live
> and stuff like that. We can post chat sessions with people from the casts
> of the flick, as well as just famous people we know. And we could do it
> every week. Whether five hundred people show up or only five, I think
> it'd be neat. (2007: 322-3)

The purported "closeness" in Smith's intent and practice of the Board runs in

opposition to the dominant discourse of "resistance" in fan studies (Sandvoss

2005: 11-43), where a legal and cultural anxiety remains around fan's practices

(Wilkinson 2010) leading to a conception of fans as a 'powerless elite'

(Tulloch 1995) – caught between producers and "mainstream" "acceptable"

audiences. Yet Hills has begun to unpack how producers can address a

multiplicity of audiences (2010: 29), with Lynn Zubernis and Katherine Larsen

categorising producorial interaction with fans – the awareness,

acknowledgement, and engagement of fan activity – as 'breaking the fourth

wall' (2012: 155-8), suggesting that there has previously been a barrier in

communication between two apparently separate groups that has now broken

down. Zubernis and Larsen question the fannish influence on producers as a

result of reciprocity in a relationship, yet what I look at in this thesis is how

producer and fans inhabit and inform the same cultural sphere simultaneously.

As a regular poster to the Board, Smith has integrated himself into his own fan culture in a sustained, consistent manner that has allowed him to articulate himself as a fan and consumer, in apparent contrast to his status as a celebrity. For example, he has used the Board and blog entries to denote his own fandom of texts such as *Star Wars* and *Battlestar Galactica* (Smith 2007: 317-21), suggesting that even if he were not a celebrity figure Smith would still be a part of *a* fan culture, but is instead able to be part of *his own* fan culture.

Continuing the theme of fan resistance and in contrast to Smith's initiation of the Board, Henry Jenkins suggests that communities are often founded by fans in order to collate interests and forge alliances in the wake of resistance against producorial bodies (1997: 507). Although the origins of community are not always consistent, the notion of fans forging alliances is recurrent in scholarship. For example, the *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* online community the Bronze was originally established by broadcaster Warner Brothers, however Asim Ali notes that in becoming the locus of a cohesive fan community, the users ("Bronzers") 'proved remarkably resilient, surviving numerous changes to [the Bronze's] online home, the closure of the Bronze upon *Buffy*'s move from The WB to UPN, the end of *Buffy* and its spin-off series *Angel*, and even the demise of both television networks that aired *Buffy*.' (2009: 87) This demonstrates that although the Bronze may have been initiated as a producer-controlled forum, fan appropriation prevailed and the community was able to establish ownership of the communal identity. Smith's initiation of the Board demonstrates a marriage of the findings of Jenkins and Ali, and this thesis will examine the Kevin Smith fan community within this context, where

the negotiation of producer-control, fan-appropriation, and producer-

interactivity is a regular occurrence.

Fans and Fan Practice

Cornel Sandvoss believes that although who or what a fan is may be "common

knowledge" (Hills 2002), identification of fan practice within a particular

culture should be classified in opposition to such assumptions:

> [W]e need a definition of fan practices that preceded normative
> evaluation. The clearest indicator of a particular emotional investment
> in a given popular text lies in its regular, repeated consumption,
> regardless of who its reader is and regardless of the possible
> implications of this affection. Many of those who label themselves as
> fans, when asked what defines their fandom, point to their patterns of
> consumption. (2005: 7)

Taking an approach where quantifiable engagement with the text demarcates

fan practice, Sandvoss moves on to define fandom as:

> [T]he regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular
> narrative or text in the form of books, television shows, films or music,
> as well as popular texts in a broader sense such as sports teams and
> popular icons and stars ranging from athletes and musicians to actors.
> (2005: 8)

While this definition works well in broadly conceptualising fandom across any

number of given fan cultures – the admission of 'popular icons' would surely

apply to Kevin Smith – the phrasing of 'regular, emotionally involved

consumption of … popular icons' becomes problematic in this study, as

although originally created with a view to perpetuating Smith fandom, the

Board now seemingly operates within contexts that do not prioritise explicit

displays of "fandom" or "fan practice" in the manner of textual poaching: fan

art or fantext (Busse and Hellekson 2006: 7); cosplay (Winge 2006; Norris and Bainbridge 2009); conjecture (Gray and Mittell 2007); activism (Jones 2012) – the things that fans supposedly *do* by definition – are not immediately obvious or inherent in Kevin Smith fandom on the Board.

Sandvoss notes that 'In one form or another the emotional commitment of … fans is reflected in the regularity with which they visit and revisit their object of fandom.' (2005: 8), so through examination of the contexts of Smith fan activities, this thesis will begin to determine the extent to which on- and offline practice reflects visitation to the *fan* object. The problematic nature – to this particular study – of Sandvoss' otherwise well-rounded definition of fandom reemphasises the issue of fan cultural subjectivity posing a problem for the application of conceptualisations of fandom. As Garry Crawford notes, 'being a fan is not just a label or a category, it is also tied into individual and group identities and social performances, which are rarely set or coherent,' (2012: 102) and Sandvoss' pointed specificity invites demonstrations of exceptions to his rule.

Yet it is not enough to note that a fan culture *does not* act in a particular manner. Such a process of deferral could be infinite – there are many theoretical concepts to which the subject of this thesis does not adhere. Instead, then, it is necessary to embrace a theoretical model that allows fluctuations of audience activity, and is not constrictive in the allowances it makes. Thusly, to support my detailing of contexts of Kevin Smith fandom in Section One, I too turn to the "1992 moment" and John Fiske's triumvirate model of fan activity. Offering a much broader template than Sandvoss, Fiske's identification of fans' textual, semiotic, and enunciative productivities allows for a greater

scope of interpretation. Fiske offers a theoretical model that can apply to a

broader scope of fan activities that doesn't attempt to explicitly label or

categorise the audiences that perform them. This means that such a model can

be similarly effectively applied across such varied audiences – or "fans" – of

video games (Crawford 2012), politicians (Sandvoss 2012), or indeed

particular filmmakers and their wider media output. Crawford summarises

Fiske's model thusly:

> Semiotic activity refers to how audiences actively interpret and
> reinterpret media themes, stories and messages. Enunciativity relates to
> social and interactive activities, such as talking about television shows
> or imitating one's favourite film or pop stars. Textual activities refer to
> the creation of new texts, such the new stories, art, poetry and songs
> based upon their favourite television shows produced by *Star Trek* and
> *Doctor Who* fans (Jenkins 1992). (2012: 37)

In using the relatively open triumvirate model to contextualise fan activities, I

allow a discussion of the way the Smith fan culture functions both in relation

and opposition to "traditional" fan practices, looking at how a culture may

appear to move "beyond" the initial parameters for which it was intended.

Taking this into account the term "fan" will be used with caution throughout

my analysis, as depending on the extent of individual participation, there may

be a knowable and definable difference between *fan* practice and *Boardie*

practice. Bringing to mind Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst's

continuum of fan practice (1998), the distinction between the two terms will be

more readily interrogated in Section Three.

(Online) Interaction and Community

Andrea MacDonald notes that from a theoretical standpoint, 'studying media fandom within computer-mediated space provides a unique opportunity to explore how CMC may change our popular culture and our pleasure time activities and gain insights into how a particular group integrates the possibilities of CMC.' (1998: 132) Building on this, I place Boardies' practices within the contemporary contexts of their own CMC, examining how current trends of web use, such as the widespread adoption of social networking sites (SNS) impacts on functionality. The importance of CMC to this study cannot be underestimated: it is, after all, the primary mode of communication for users of the Board.

"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

Figure 1: 'On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog.' Peter Steiner 1993.

In an article for *Time*, Lev Grossman notes how SNS Facebook is "the future" where 'Identity is not a performance or a toy … it is a fixed and orderly fact. Nobody does anything secretly: a news feed constantly updates your friends on your activities. On Facebook, everybody knows you're a dog.' (2007)

Referring to Peter Steiner's famous 1993 *New Yorker* cartoon (Figure 1),

Grossman signals how widespread adoption of SNSs comprises a saturation of

personal identity (Ellis 2010: 40), where one's self is far more "knowable" than

previous discussions of CMC have allowed. My study will examine the manner

in which Boardies conceptualise the process of online identity shaping, taking

into account the relationship between the Board and SNSs, and how use of the

two fits in to everyday web routine.

The study of CMC in relation to fan cultures has become more

prevalent and necessary with the communicative properties of the Internet –

fans have often been categorised as those most familiar with adopting new

media technologies (Jenkins 2006). As a result of her ethnographic study of the

rec.arts.tv.soaps online newsgroup, Nancy Baym notes:

> [P]articipants in CMC develop forms of expression that enable
> them to communicate social information and to create and codify
> group-specific meanings, socially negotiate group-specific
> identities, form relationships that span from the playfully
> antagonistic to the deeply romantic and that move between the
> network and face-to-face interaction, and create norms that serve to
> organize interaction and to maintain desirable social climates.
> (1998: 62)

Baym's summary can act as a suitable general description of the findings of

other online fan studies (Brooker 2001b; Gatson and Zweerink 2004; Williams

2004; Andrejevic 2008; Ross 2008; Ali 2009) and in addressing the

behavioural and communicative practices of the Kevin Smith fan community

within the general context of computer mediated communication, I can

demonstrate the extent to which Board practices mirror Baym's findings.

Although the primary concern of my study will be to examine the ways in which the members of the community categorise their relationships with both each other and Kevin Smith – particularly when the object of their fandom is a participating member of the fan culture – my research will discuss and determine the forms and functions of the View Askew fan community as an online entity. In addressing the distinction between the general and the specific, I will examine the extent to which Smith's fans categorise their community as distinct from others, and if they recognise their relationship with Smith as particularly special, despite possibly sharing characteristics of other online fan communities. Taking Baym's summary of CMC into account, I will examine whether the fans feel interacting with Smith is as commonplace as communicating with any other internet user, or whether his status as the initiator/subject of the community takes precedence.

However, the study of any kind of community – on- or offline – will inevitably be caught up in the debate surrounding what exactly is meant by the term, and it is the nature of fans' communal self-categorisation that I examine in Section Two. Stephanie Tuszynski notes that "community" 'has been part of countless debates across various areas of academic study, largely because what is or is not a community can be such a subjective distinction and the word comes with a level of privilege attached.' (2008: 76) Indeed, many scholars avoid taking a firm stance: David Bell, for instance, ponders the notion of a '"community of car drivers" – what parts of car driving identity are shared? Is it the sets of knowledge one has? The institutionalised components? The membership to other "off-road" communities?' In asking "does that make me part of a car driving community?" Bell gives 'an unemphatic "Maybe"' (2001:

100), before noting that whatever definition one appropriates in terms of *online community* seemingly depends on one's perspective on and experience of computers and communities (2001: 102). In addition to Nancy Baym's belief that an online community can be categorised as such if the participants imagine themselves to be (1998), my approach to researching the Kevin Smith fan community will be inflected by my own experiences and that of other fans (see below), moreso than any particular noted definition.

In discussing the nature of *fan* communities, Chin notes that much scholarly work uses the terms "community" and "fandom" interchangeably, painting an inaccurate picture of a homogenous fandom. Chin argues that in actuality 'fandom is made up of a variety of small-scale communities that serve different factions of the fandom at large' (2010: 126) Markus Wohlfeil and Susan Whelan have made a similar argument in relation to fandom more generally, which in their view has historically been guilty of ignoring the experience of individuals in favour of 'the social dynamics and symbolic relationships that consumers experience with other fans within their respective consumption subcultures' (2012). Yet I do not believe that study of fan communities/individuals can be an either/or scenario. A holistic approach means that the study of individuals will necessarily consider the relation to wider groups and vice-versa; such a tension can be seen in Will Brooker's analysis of *Star Wars* fans (2002) where he gives entire chapters to the respective analyses of "together" and "alone", and Sherry Turkle dedicates an entire volume to the tension of the individual and the communal (2011), the result of televisions and computers now acting as communal network nodes (Gatson and Zweerink 2004: 46).

As a result, this thesis will more readily follow the mode of analysis that Sandvoss identifies as being concerned with the proliferation of communities in relation to fandom, which 'inevitably [carry] a different theoretical focus on questions of collective rather than individual identity, of group interaction, style and community.' (2005: 9) Taking into account contexts of online interactivity and SNSs, I will be interested in examining the degree to which sociality – as well as fandom – plays a role in the perpetuation of online community. In highlighting sociality as a key factor in the way fan communities operate, Stephanie Tuszynski identifies the way in which recent studies of fan cultures frequently have become drawn to the relationships between fans themselves than the object of the fandom (2008: 83). It is the social activity organised around these cultural commodities that becomes a signifier for fan practices at large.

Such studies of fandoms have allowed opportunities to discuss the way in which fans are categorised (by both themselves and others), and the labels developed help in the processes of mapping fan activity. Some terms that have been adopted are "Xenites" for fans of *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Stafford 2002), or "X-Philes" for *X-Files* fans (Wooley 2001), with perhaps "Trekkies" (rather than the fan-preferred "Trekkers") being the most well known in wider culture (Jenkins 1992). Most explicitly with these examples is the way in which the primary point of categorisation is the cultural product that the fan culture supports. In these cases the fans are defined by their fandom regardless of the specificities of their activity. However where we begin to see the prevalence of socialisation as identified by Tuszynski is within groups of fans who embrace a different kind of activity where the cultural product in question

becomes secondary to everyday interactions, and those that use the Board will be discussed in this context. In being named for a cyber space rather than the object of their fandom – referring to themselves as "Boardies" – I will examine how the behaviour of these Kevin Smith fans does not necessarily reflect solely online practices, and can in fact represent behaviour that occurs in offline spaces as well – "Boardie" in this case being co-opted to signify a particular aspect of Kevin Smith fan practice. Examination of such a practice will demonstrate the shifting and malleable nature of fan cultures, meaning that although labels such as "Xenites", "X-Philes", "Trekkers", and "Boardies" seemingly allow us to easily '[incorporate] a whole range of networks into a specific social dynamic,' (Pickerill 2003: 16) it is perhaps more apt to unpack these terms within the specific operational contexts of their respective fan cultures.

Methodology

This thesis will consequently take the form of an audience study, examining the ways in which Kevin Smith fans operate in order to maintain a community of like-minded individuals, dedicated to articulating their shared fandom in a mediated online setting originally established by Smith himself. This thesis will be influenced by my own experiences as a Kevin Smith fan, with my participation in the fan community informing my research and the way in which I subsequently present and analyse my data. Accordingly, although I make general reference to "Boardies", "the fans", or "the fan community", my own status as fan means I should be similarly included within these categories.

My chosen methodological practice of qualitative participation, scholar-

fandom, and subject interaction closely follows Robert Kozinets' model of

netnography, a method he describes thusly:

> Netnography adapts common participant-observation ethnographic
> procedures to the unique contingencies of computer-mediated social
> interaction: alteration, accessibility, anonymity, and archiving. The
> procedures include planning, entrée, gathering data, interpretation,
> and adhering to ethical standards. (2010: 58)

Kozinets simplifies the data collection of the methodology into three steps (of

five – the initial two being definition of research questions, and identifying the

community of study):
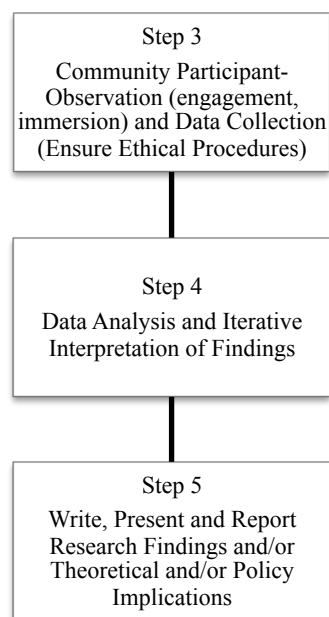
Figure 2: The stages of netnography (Kozinets 2010: 61).

In adopting these methods, I principally define my methodology as a

netnography – an online ethnographic research project that uses interviews and

interaction with participants to present qualitative data within an

autoethnographic context. Here I demonstrate why netnography is the most

suitable approach for my research. Taking into account ethnography,

quantitative and qualitative methods, and the practicalities of research ethics, I

will establish how netnography can be adapted from each of these categories in

order to provide a methodology that most effectively complements my

audience research.

Lauraine LeBlanc argues that ethnography is the best methodological

strategy as it immerses the researcher in the research (1999: 20), and Dick

Hobbs describes this research process as:

> A cocktail of methodologies that share the assumption that personal
> engagement with the subject is the key to understanding a particular
> culture of social setting. Participant observation is the most common
> component of this cocktail, but interviews, conversational and discourse
> analysis, documentary analysis, film and photography all have their place
> in the ethnographer's repertoire. Description resides at the core of
> ethnography, and however this description is constructed it is the intense
> meaning of social life from the everyday perspective of group members
> that is sought. (2006: 101)

Yet Kozinets is critical of such a methodological "cocktail". Believing that

differing research practices diminishes the role of participant study, he notes

that ethnography is:

> ... interlinked with multiple other methods. We give these other
> methods that it is linked to other names ... They have other names
> because they are sufficiently different from the overall practice of
> ethnography that they require new designations ... Although they relate
> to participation in, and observation of, communities and cultures, they
> do so in particular ways, capturing data in specific ways, dictated by
> specific, agreed upon standards. (2010: 59)

Furthermore, Suchitra Mouly and Jayaram Sankaran note that 'ethnography emphasizes viewing the culture from *its members' points of view*' (1995: 14, emphasis in original), highlighting the actions of the community as a site of primary emphasis. Mouly and Sankaran note that one must become "immersed" in their community of study, becoming simultaneously an insider and outsider, keeping a record of their "objective" observations and subjective feelings (Ibid.: 20). Mouly and Sankaran use the term "objective" with caution, which they are right to do. If one is to become immersed in a community, their "insider" status will impact the "objectivity" of any conclusions – therefore my status as Kevin Smith fan must be maintained throughout my thesis, in order to reiterate the context of my own "objectivity". David Fetterman believes that ethnography:

> …attempts to be holistic – covering as much territory as possible about a culture, subculture, or program – but it necessarily falls far short of the whole. …The ethnographer's task is not only to collect information from the emic or insider's perspective, but also to make sense of all the data from an etic or external social scientific perspective. (1989: 21)

In contrast, however, Mouly and Sankaran note D.H. Hyme's identification of three classifications of ethnography: comprehensive, topic-oriented, and hypothesis-oriented (1995: 18), demonstrating that an ethnography need not attempt to be holistic, and can be selective with the aspects of community it decides to research. Because of this, my adoption of an ethnographic methodology will allow me to answer the key questions pertaining to my thesis – a selective set based on the idea of fandom and community, rather than attempting a comprehensive ethnographic study that tries to cover all aspects of the culture.

Matthew Miles and A. Michael Huberman note that 'fierce battles' have been fought on the topic of choosing either a quantitative or qualitative approach (1994: 40) and that 'Quantitative studies have been linked with positivism and damned as incommensurable with naturalistic, phenomenological studies ... [whereas qualitative researchers] have complained that they are disparaged as The Other, losing out against the powerful, prestigious establishment that takes quantitative methods for granted' (Ibid).

A common stance then, is to place the two methods in opposition to one another, suggesting that a research project can only adopt one approach. Martin Barker dismisses this notion, suggesting that the two methods can be combined effectively in audience research, and that a mixed-methods approach can yield a clear, concise means of presenting data (2006a). Yet William Axinn and Lisa Pearce argue that the dichotomies between qualitative and quantitative are too simplistic in the first place, where distinctions made are usually in reference to whether data is coded into numbers or text (2006: 21-2), instead observing that 'No matter which approach to coding and analysis one chooses, the researcher's insights into the study population have profound consequences for the outcome of the study' (Ibid: 38).

Yet regardless of the way in which someone chooses to code data, Sandvoss argues that 'we need to reduce individual fan cultures in scale and move … to the common themes, motivations and implications of the interaction between fans and their objects of fandom.' (2005: 4) As Cresswell and Plano Clark point out (2007: 34), quantitative research is often galvanised by supporting qualitative information (Harris 1998; Gray and Mittell 2007),

and although Hills has warned that ethnographic fan studies have 'largely erred on the side of accepting fan discourse as interpretive "knowledge"' (2002: 66), when a project discusses fans' feelings, emotions, and passions for the subject they are talking about it is often more suitable to feature qualitative analysis so that the "humanity" of the participants is retained (Mills 2008).

Barker notes that qualitative research allows for an easier identification of response patterns (2006), a practice employed by Charles Soukup to great length. Yet while Soukup spent 'weeks of analyzing and recording characteristics of hundreds of fansites in my fieldnotes (2006: 325) I shall consider a more direct approach in communicating with the subjects of my study. In addition to the ethical issues involved with Soukup's method (discussed below), direct communication arguably allows for a greater opportunity for finding participants and building rapport (Darlington and Scott 2002: 51-59). The notion of "finding" participants becomes particularly pertinent when aiming to recruit a specifically online contingent – Miles Booy for instance asks what fandom was like before the Internet allowed for a more easily identifiable contingent (2012: 4). Emma Beddows notes the way in which researchers may become overly-reliant on using a particular online "hub" to recruit participants (2008: 127), and how individuals without Internet access would be automatically excluded from the research process (Ibid.: 126). Indeed, studies of online communities frequently concern themselves with a single online space (McLaughlin, Osbourne and Smith 1995; Horn 1998; Busse 2006; Turner 2006), and the methodological challenges associated with finding non-online (and non-"hub") participants will be explored in Section Three. Such a consideration also forces one to question how to research the

"unresearchable" – can there ever be a worthwhile study of a group if some of that apparent group do not give their consent to be studied? Context of experience seems to feed into how one conceptualises this "excluded" group in the first place. As Gatson and Zweerink note:

> If one were posting and reading as everyone else was, one might see an offline contingent develop, and one might not. That would not be a bad ethnographic site it would just be the ethnographic site it was, with a different shape, order, and culture than others. If people were interested in keeping a particular node away from other nodes as a whole or if particular people were interested in keeping their embodied nodes from one another those would be empirical questions. (2004: 44)

My study will take place largely in an online setting. Yet, as I will detail below, my own experience of Kevin Smith fandom in practice means that I am aware that offline activities also take place. In including analysis of such practices in this thesis, I will be required then to not only gather data via CMC, but also through face-to-face interviews. For example, if I were to meet fans at an organised Kevin Smith fan event (as I go on to do in Section Two), the nature of the environment would likely have some effect on their responses. Kozinets summarises the distinction between face-to-face and online interviews, noting:

> Bruckman ... opines that "online interviews are of limited value" and asserts that face-to-face or phone interviews offer far greater insight. Although I agree that synchronous, text-based, chat interviews tend to offer a very thin and often rather rushed and superficial interaction, I believe that other online means such as e-mail, and of course online audio and audio visual connections, are extremely valuable. (2010: 46)

I agree with Kozinets, and feel that online questioning is just as valid a form of research interaction as face-to-face. Particularly when dealing with online communities, it is perhaps an even more valid approach, as I would expect

those who participate in my study to already be familiarly acquainted with text-based online interaction. Although face-to-face discussions may prove an interesting counter-point, because my study is of an online setting the contextualising portion of the research will primarily take place in an online setting.

Research Ethics

When dealing with research that concerns human subjects, one must take into account ethical considerations. Guidance can be sought from one's own institution for such research – this thesis adheres to the code set by the University of East Anglia – but for this study, ethical considerations can also take into account more specific guidance for CMC and for fan cultures. Natasha Whiteman acknowledges the difficulty in trying to maintain a "pure" ethical stance – one that pleases all stakeholders – for the duration of the research:

> Difficulties arise because researchers have multiple responsibilities that exert different pressures/requirements. The problem with focusing on the ethics of the academy, for example, is that the researcher also has a responsibility to the research setting/audience. The problem with focusing on the ethics of the researched is that researchers also have a professional, "collegiate" (Dowling and Brown 2010) responsibility to other researchers (e.g. not polluting the field, Ibid). Due to these different responsibilities, researchers need to establish a transactional approach between their own engagement with, and recruitment of, the ethics of the academy and the ethics of the researched. (2012: 44)

Whiteman suggests that in having an ethical stance that reflects the best interests of those invested in the research, one should address each investment according to their relative merits, and then negotiate a position so all can be

satisfied. In the case of my work, I need to ensure a proper commitment to the needs of the University of East Anglia, the field of fan studies, and users of the View Askew Message Board.

Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson note that the multifarious means by which fan cultures can be studied, and the diversity of interdisciplinary methodologies means that 'there can be no hard-and-fast rule.' (2012: 41) Instead, they suggest a policy 'which remains open enough to accommodate different scenarios while protecting fannish spaces and individual fans – as well as a researcher's code of ethics and academic rigor.' (Ibid.) Maintaining academic integrity is vital and should remain a priority, but one should be aware and prepared for the potential for minor deviation due to the specific needs of the project.

One of the first concerns is the use of fan-created material. Although one must pay in order to post on the Board, it is freely accessible to those who wish to read. This "public" nature means that one could quite easily obtain data via the observation and analysis of forum threads (Bury 2005; Whiteman 2009), perhaps using only the webmaster/administrator as a guardian of informed consent (Brooker 2002). In contrast to Charles Soukup's qualitative research, David Bell notes that 'lurking as a research technique is widely condemned by virtual ethnographers … [it] is not acceptable since it puts the researcher in a powerful and distant position – the academic is someone who gazes on others, appropriating their actions for the purposes of research.' (2001: 198) There are certainly limitations to lurking as a research method, as there is a tendency to look for results that reflect one's assumptions, rather than letting data lead the research; there is a greater interest in *what is being said,*

rather than *who is saying it*. A desirable quote may be found for use in study, but if it is not understood who has said it, and that person's motivations and behaviour, the data loses important contextual information.

For instance, Whiteman notes that observation of her forums of study was 'supplemented by a range of activities which informed my understanding of discussion on the sites … These activities were a continuation of my own personal and more "fannish" interest in these [primary] texts. (2009: 396) Part of my own participation in the Kevin Smith fan culture has been to talk to others on the Board. As a result, following Whiteman's lead my fannish activities should be reflected in my research activities, where I maintain a desire for openness with potential participants, and arrange a setting for research whereby I am not necessarily encroaching on a social space.

Bell's description of lurking as 'virtual voyeurism' (2001: 198) carries with it negative connotations – specifically that of being rude or (un)intrusive. Whiteman has later gone on to dispel this notion, observing that in many online environments 'lurking is a normal state of being. Visitors to such sites are invisible, only coming into the public gaze of other visitors if and when they make an utterance. … [I]n such sites, *everyone* is hidden unless they post a contribution to the site' (2012: 109, emphasis in original). However, whilst this may be the case, it forgoes some basic principles of netiquette, and when I would consider myself a part of the online community, I am keen to maintain such behavioural codes, and use them to guide my ethical stance (Mann and Stewart 2000: 59).

In terms of gaining consent for material, the University of East Anglia's Research Ethics Policy states that:

> Normally, potential participants in research should give their informed consent prior to participation, and the lead researcher is responsible for obtaining that person's consent. Consent must be given freely and voluntarily and under no circumstances must coercion be used to obtain a person's consent to participate in research. There should be a recognition and consideration of any power differential between the researcher and participant in this context. Wherever possible, and proportionate to the nature of the research activity, an individual's consent should be obtained in writing. Where this is not possible oral consent should be obtained, ideally in the presence of at least one witness.[4]

Adhering to this ethical code of conduct, I shall inform potential research participants of my study, allowing them to opt in or out of my research as they see fit. This means that I will only include data that I have explicit permission to use. Yet as noted above, the fact that the Board is freely available to read means that some users may not want their contribution attributed to their Board username. The UEA ethical code requires that 'Researchers must make arrangements to carefully protect the confidentiality of participants. All personal information collected should be considered privileged information and dealt with in such a manner as not to compromise the personal dignity of the participant or to infringe upon their right to privacy.'[5] This has been a more pressing concern with online research, where, as the Association of Internet Researchers ethical guidelines state, 'Data aggregators or search tools make information accessible to a wider public than what might have been originally

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[4] University of East Anglia Research Ethics Policy, Principle and Procedures, Approved by Senate 23/11/05 (with revisions 21/6/06), Section 2.2.3 'Obtaining Consent'.
[5] Ibid., Section 2.2.8 'Anonymity, Confidentiality and Data Protection'.

intended.' (2012: 6)[6] Furthermore, Busse and Hellekson note that 'plenty of fans who post publicly still expect certain forms of privacy' (2012: 46).

Offering participants due privacy is therefore a concern in institutional, interdisciplinary, and research specific contexts. As a result, although one *can* use identifying data from an online source, does not mean that they *should*. Kozinets iterates this by noting 'the fact that people know that their postings are public does not automatically lead to the conclusion that academics and other types of researchers can use the data in any way that they please.' (2010: 137) Taking this into account, my work will strive to protect the interests of research subjects, and make as explicit as possible opportunities for those to participate.

By making clear that participation is optional, participants will be required to agree to a set of terms and conditions when answering a questionnaire (as well as engaging in follow-up email interviews). Following a template set by Gatson and Zweerink in their study of the Bronze (2004: 19), I constructed a set of terms which make clear my research intentions, and for what purposes participants can expect their data to be used:

> This is an online survey designed by Tom Phillips to look at the online habits of the Kevin Smith fan community. The results will only be used for academic publication or presentation. All reasonable measures will be taken to ensure confidentiality of any identifying information gathered. Because of the public nature of the View Askew Message Board, you may wish to provide an alternate nickname for the author to refer to - this option can be found within the survey itself. The survey may take up to 15 minutes to complete, depending on the scope and depth of your answers. You may refuse to answer any question, and may withdraw from participating at any point. This survey is only open to those over the age of 18 years, and any ineligible submissions will be

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[6] Located online at http://aoir.org/documents/ethics-guide/

discarded. Submitting your responses is an acknowledgement that you agree to these terms of consent.[7]

As can be seen, in addition to this informed consent, participants are offered a further right to privacy. Although respondents may already post under a pseudonym, I offer further anonymity by changing names if desired. The Board's status as an active community where relationships may be affected by data revelations means that any potentially inflammatory statements or conclusions are tempered by a context of plausible deniability (Herring 1996: 157).

The timing of my study may also have an effect on the privacy considerations I make. For example, in February 2010 after Smith's ejection from a flight for being overweight (Phillips 2012a), excess web traffic caused the Board to become a private space, closed off completely to those without a username and password. Taking into consideration Kozinets' observation that not everyone who posts necessarily wants to contribute, I must remain mindful of the status of the Board when conducting research. If for example it is in a "private" period, closed-off from non-users for an extra ordinary reason, posters may be more wary of outside entrée into their community. It is this potential for wariness that leads me to further commit to the frequent admission of my own fan practices to potential research participants.

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[7] Similarly, all email correspondence include this signature statement: 'This email account has been established to provide communication leading to data for Tom Phillips' PhD research. All reasonable measures will be taken to ensure confidentiality of any identifying information gathered in the contents of this email message. Research participants may refuse to answer any question, and may withdraw from participating at any point. Research participants have the right to request the omission of any data gleaned from these emails from the final project.'

The frequent discourse of online ethics therefore appears to be that one's stance should be taken on a case-by-case basis (AOIR 2012: 12). Being mindful of my ethical and personal responsibilities to my participants, my institution, and my field, I position myself in order to maintain my subject's humanity, protecting their rights to privacy, and perpetuating a friendly stance thanks to netiquette pleasantries. Establishing a separate (opt-in) portal for online data collection, as well as a dedicated email account for research related correspondence will make participants feel at ease that not that every post they make may be subject to academic scrutiny. This is not to say that I would not talk about my work on the Board, but that anything "on the record" will be in a clearly delineated environment. As a result, although I claim both academic and fan identities, the reconciliation between the two should be minimally disruptive.

Scholar-fandom

The research contexts that inform this study lead me along a logical path of qualitative research in order to answer the questions I have about this fan community. What has been omitted from the Introduction thus far is an explicit discussion of my own personal motivation for this research topic, and the consideration of these motivations will have an effect on the manner in which I approach my fan study. Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* is frequently credited with coining the concept of scholar-fandom (or acafandom) with his personal declaration as someone who identifies as both a fan and an academic (Jenkins 2011), studying that of which he is a fan.

Yet the status of scholar-fandom, and what it means to be a scholar-fan, has been going through a period of reassessment and reflection. Jonathan Gray has called for the term to be made redundant, asking for categorisations to stop being made in order that 'fandom doesn't seem – to outsiders, newbies, and some weaker scholars – to be a zone for mere celebration.' (Gray et al. 2011) Louisa Stein agrees with this assessment, arguing that:

> … aca/fan is most vitally understood as a contextual position that we bring to our work as well as to our investment in media texts and/or their communities. … Just as gender papers/panels shouldn't be segregated in conferences, but rather inform the whole … so too should acafans model the (feminist) value of affective scholarship and self-reflexive insight. (2011)

I too would lean towards eradication of the term, but not with prejudice. Passion for one's research (either positive or negative) is always present, and thus should be measured on a continuum, with scholar-fandom labelled as a point on that continuum. Although adherence to stringent academic analysis is required – Will Brooker for instance has noted how his past work 'could have stepped back from the "fan" position and held more towards the "academic"' (2011) – one's personal position to research should be embraced and admitted to, as explicitly highlighting one's personal (not necessarily "fan") position helps to contextualise work.

Speaking against these 'discursive mantras of scholar-fandom', Matt Hills argues that the assimilation of scholar and fan identities should be resisted, with a more multiple view of 'differently positioned modes of scholar-fandom' called for at this point in fan studies (2012: 14-15), he instead proposing a method that prioritised 'proper distance', rather than the more readily definable "normative" or "transitive" scholar-fan positions (Busse and

Hellekson 2006; Coker and Benefiel 2010; Booth 2010a). By taking such an approach, Hills argues, acafandom can avoid "speaking for" just one fragment of a fan culture, and can instead produce fan studies scholarship that represents a less restricted canon.

Hills' stance against these other positions represents that which he has previously examined in his own work, in that opinion of how engaging personal research is likely to be is highly subjective, for he notes that in the moments of scholar-fan "embarrassment" in their admissions:

> …we can see the mechanisms of a cultural (not merely subjective) system of value at work. It is a system of value which powerfully compels subjects to strive to work within the boundaries of "good" imagined subjectivity, or face the consequences of pathologisation. (2002: 12)

Hills' observation here sheds light on the value judgements academics are prone to making, and also makes a clear case for arguing that the personal can be considered "good" as well. My own approach to scholar-fandom suggests an embrace of the personal in order to improve the overall quality of one's work, and I build upon Hills' 2002 definition of scholar-fandom to situate my work:

> [T]he scholar-fan must still conform to the regulative ideal of the rational academic subject, being careful not to present too much of their enthusiasm while tailoring their accounts of fan interest and investment to the norms of "confessional" (but not overly confessional) academic writing. (2002: 11-2)

Hills' account of the responsibilities of the scholar-fan suggests that although there is scope for personal accounts within academic writing, boundaries should be drawn to prevent work from becoming too personal and therefore

undermining the author's credibility. Hills' observation suggests that a little personality *can* inject verve into a potentially staid academic piece, but there exists a real danger that in revealing ones thoughts and feelings to peers academic authority and capital can be lost. Yet what I will argue for in this thesis is through writing honestly about my fan experience the scholar-fan should embrace an "overly confessional" approach to academic writing.

My first experience of Kevin Smith was in 2002, when I decided to buy the *Mallrats* VHS on a whim. I hadn't heard of Smith nor any of his characters at this point, and indeed as a hormone-fuelled seventeen-year-old, I found the prominence of star Shannen Doherty on the cover to be the most appealing feature initially. Enjoying the film, I began to seek out more of Smith's work, and it was when I began watching the films on DVD – with access to humorous behind-the-scenes material and commentaries – that I began to identify myself as a Kevin Smith fan, and articulated my fandom as a consumer. I began to round-out my Smith DVD collection, bought comic books he had authored, ordered Jay and Silent Bob-themed clothing from his online store, attended Q&A events in London, and visited various filming locations in Smith's hometown of Red Bank, New Jersey. As a result, this thesis uses my own fandom as a springboard to launch into debates about the nature of fan practices, engagement with cultural practitioners, and the boundaries of online "community". Thusly, my scholar-fan approach to this research can, in theory, be coded as a desire to write about something which gives me pleasure (Jenemann 2010), and I feel the admission of such passion is key.

Dana Bode states that 'In my online life, I wear four hats: professional writer, reader, fan fiction author, and academic' (2008), and I too regularly subscribe to this multiplicitous analogy. Nancy Baym notes 'Digital media seems to separate selves from bodies, leading to *disembodied identities* that exist only in actions and words,' (2010: 105, emphasis in original) and with the apparent ubiquity of one's "open" online presence, these disembodied identities can begin to merge, and differentiation between one's "hats" can begin to subside: academic, fan, and personal identities collapse into one. While this may not directly adhere to Hills' concept of the overly confessional, allowing one's "personal" self to be at least *accessible* to an academic audience has implicit connotations of unprofessionalism and the loss of academic authority (Doty 2000). Although this may be a danger most academics would surely be keen to avoid, I would argue that in some cases a lean towards openness and individuality can in fact lend greater academic authority because of the personal attachment and investment to the subject.

The exclusion of intimate fan admission in scholarly work signals a cultural hierarchy in practice. Shane Toepher, for example, notes the way in which admission of his fandom of professional wrestling is complicated because of his, academics' and media cultural distinctions towards the text, preferring instead to say that he is a fan of professional wrestling 'in theory' (2011: 16). That he is not able to feel completely comfortable in his admission points perhaps to a larger issue with academic practice more generally, where authors must conform to a particular style lest they be open to ridicule. Markus Wohlfeil has addressed such a tension head-on in his discussion of his fandom of actress Jena Malone:

> While I honestly believe that I have been quite successful in my professional career so far, especially since entering academia, my private life, unfortunately, feels more like a failure to me. Like anybody else, I suspect, I was imagining since my early teenage years what it is like to go out with a girl, to be in love with her, how it feels like to share the first kiss, the first time with each other, etc. But the years passed by and nothing really happened in this regard. While everyone else around me seemed without much effort to be falling happily in and out of love with their special ones, I suffered one rejection after another, as no girl found me attractive or interesting enough to date me. In fact, in my entire life I've only been in a few relationships with females, which never lasted very long and the last one ended some time ago. (2011: 4)

Startlingly personal, Wohlfeil's account may seem out of place for a "traditional" scholarly work. Yet it is important information that shapes the contexts of his interest in Malone, meaning that even if it is potentially embarrassing information, Wohlfeil cannot be accused of academic laziness. On the contrary, his overly confessional explanation is stringent and well-rounded, offering a pertinent research context. Karen Hellekson notes that the respective pursuits of knowledge by the academic and the fan are similarly coded as practices that reward an engagement with 'the unbearable pleasure of the text,' (Hellekson et al. 2011), and Wohlfeil signals his pleasure as both fan and academic, one and the same.

The notion that questionable levels of personal taste within academic writing can be moderated by even further personal material is likely to be contentious, yet my own research process here is similarly inflected by a belief that academic and fan are 'two sides of the same proverbial coin' (Booth 2010a). In a supervisory exercise in 2010 I discussed my formal entrée onto the Board that began the research collation stage of the thesis. Within this initial Board post (further examined in Chapter Two) I revealed my academic

intentions, my (self-assessed) fan cultural capital (Fiske 1992: 42), and the fact

that I had posted previously to the Board, albeit briefly, in 2003. Reflecting on

this process during the paper, I detailed how my initial dealings with fellow

fans, long prior to postgraduate study, revealed an early form of scholar-

fandom. Based on an authorship study I had written at A2 Level, I introduced

myself with the intention of portraying myself as a scholar-fan (though not

actively recognising myself as such at the time):

> I recently finished a project for my film studies course on auteur theory,
> with Kevin Smith as my subject. I was just interested to see what others
> think of his status as an auteur and his filmmaking ability. If anyone is
> interested in reading the various essays I wrote on the subject I would
> gladly share an email correspondence (Tom84, Board post, 01/02/03,
> 11:34:58)

However, the post received no replies, and in my work I reflected how my

formally-worded scholar-fan approach had failed to engage other fans,

potentially deterred them from interacting with me. Such an observation was

an attempt to suggest that academic discourse held no appeal for Boardies, a

point that would have been supported by the description of my failed "Askew

Auteur" Geocities website (Figure 3) – an online portal that held my A2

material that similarly failed to incite interaction.
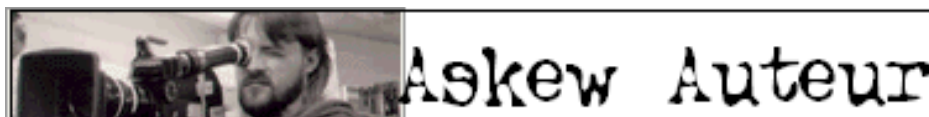
Figure 3: The "Askew Auteur" webpage logo.

However, as I would later concede to my supervisors this was actually *my*

second post – my first being my contribution of "girl advice" to a Boardie

having relationship problems:

> I've been in a similar situation a couple of years ago- liking the girl but the couple are both friends of mine. I decided to step back and not do anything and they are still together now - I still kick myself for not having done anything about it and making my feelings known. My advice - go for it, tell her how you feel. if that doesn't work, hell, we all know that all any girl needs is a good, deep dicking :) (Tom84, Board post, 01/02/03, 11:26:57)

On the occasions I have publically made this disclosure, the revelation has generally elicited laughter. Making this fact known, and receiving this response is a somewhat embarrassing occurrence – here the musings of my eighteen-year-old self have come back to question my academic integrity in the name of ethical transparency.[8] Yet despite the potential for embarrassment, I have continued to broadcast this incident, as I think it highlights a pertinent example of the overly confessional as a research practice to be encouraged.

My first attempt at discussing my forays onto the Board reveals a concern about how – academically and socially – my work will be judged. I am attempting to fit my interrogation into a pattern deemed "appropriate" for scholarly work. Yet in deliberately emphasising the over confessional myself, I set the parameters for what can be considered academically "appropriate" for my work. By confessing to an extreme scenario, "regular" scholar-fan activities are rendered less questionable, and embarrassing anecdotal evidence can be used to contextualise one's relative academic authority. This juxtaposition results in moments where a potential 'sadly celebratory tone' (Haggins 2001: 25) – a danger inherent to scholar-fans – is tempered by the inclusion of material that can be regarded as personally embarrassing, rather than professionally questionable.

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[8] Indeed, to distance myself from any accusations of misogyny today, I point to the fact that the advice of 'a good deep dicking' is derived from *Chasing Amy* dialogue.

The scholar-fan approach to academia is wrought with difficulty, and striking an adequate balance can be an unenviable task – the conflicting notions of how one should approach it demonstrate this difficulty in action. However, maintaining an objective, detached approach is arguably just as challenging. Considering this brings into doubt previous value judgements about the nature of personal writing – if both methods require that care must be taken, one cannot necessarily be considered more academically sound than the other. By examining the way in which embracing the overly confessional can add to a writer's academic authority, I suggest that Hills' assertion that the scholar-fan *must still* 'conform to the regulative ideal of the rational academic subject' is no longer a requirement. Whether considering oneself a scholar-fan, aca-fan, or researcher-fan, perhaps it is time to reassess these labels (as Gray and Stein suggest), and whether they are still needed. In questioning the value judgements as to what constitutes "proper" academic writing, it is also worth questioning whether it is necessary to even categorise researchers in such a manner, or ask if we are all simply just researchers adhering to varying degrees of the confessional. Such considerations will be implicit in this thesis which will inflect discussion of Kevin Smith fandom with my own first-hand experiences of the culture.

Previous scholar-fans' differing approaches to articulating their fandom, and the level of interaction they have with the subject of their research reflects various aspects of my own methodological concerns. In contrasting examples of ethnographic studies of the Bronze, Gatson and Zweerink (2004) and Asim Ali (2009) describe their own immersion into the community of study. Gatson and Zweerink's work is situated as being an extension of their

own interest in a community they were already a part of (2004: 22-3) whereas

Ali noted he 'followed a trajectory similar to that of other Bronzers … as I

progressed from being a guy watching TV, to a *Buffy* fan, to an observer of the

Bronze, to a member of the Bronze community.' (2009: 87-8). Kozinets'

account of netnography validates this linear, sequential approach to integration,

for he notes:

> Not every netnographic researcher needs to be involved in *every* type of community activity. But every netnographic researcher needs to be involved in *some* types of community activity. A netnographer probably doesn't want to be leading the community, but she should not be invisible, either. (2010: 96)

As mentioned above, following Kozinets' direction I began to inflect my

scholar-fan practice with active engagement on the Board. I took time to

carefully draft an introduction to fellow users that would reveal who I was,

why I was there, and why I had only just decided to post, despite having been

signed up since 2004.[9] I was quite deliberate in the manner that I structured my

introduction. I felt that although my ultimate aim was an academic issue –

gaining trust from potential participants for my PhD research – it would be

unwise to make this fact known straightaway and in an explicit manner that

may give the impression to readers that I am *solely* on the Board for academic

purposes. Therefore, I opted to open with some personal information about

myself, followed by a statement highlighting my fan cultural capital, before

mentioning very briefly the actual subject of my PhD study.[10]

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[9] When the Board migrated to a new web domain in 2004, users were required to re-register. I registered in the initial crossover period (before registration required a fee), and had kept the same login credentials through to 2010 and the commencement of this research.

[10] More detailed analysis of this entrée can be found in Chapter Two.

After addressing the queries of the Boardies, I decided to make some alterations to my online profile. Despite originally posting as "Tom84" – a combination of my name and year of birth, and the handle I first adopted during my 2003 Board activity – I decided to change my username to reflect the reception of my introduction, by adopting the more comical name "PeepingTom". A play on my name and the fact that I had lurked for six years on the Board, PeepingTom became my participatory handle, the username that signalled both my fan heritage as well as my research aims, cementing my scholar-fan identity on the Board.

In providing a template for participation, Kozinets recommends an honest (yet wary and controlled) approach for fellow netnographers, and similar to Hills' caution of an "overly-confessional" approach, warns:

> Be aware as you begin your project that archiving and accessibility cut both ways. The Internet is forever. Everything you post online is accessible to everyone, very likely for a long time to come. ... So, before you think about incorporating the cultural interaction of online community members into your research, consider what your netnographic incursion might look like as a part of *my* research. (2010: 93)

Yet Kozinets' opinion again speaks to similar ideas of capital surrounding the "appropriateness" of particular kinds of academic work. His warning to researchers about the potential for scholarly ridicule demonstrates how his notion of academic analysis falls within a prescribed rhetoric of "professionalism". Yet as I have examined here, where deeper context is called for, personal information can be warranted.

Having examined various methodological approaches above, and examined Kozinets' netnography within their respective contexts, it is logical

that I define my methodology as a netnography – an online ethnographic research project that uses interviews and interaction with participants to present qualitative data within an autoethnographic context. Kozinets' work is the best approach to studying the Kevin Smith fan community. It takes into account my scholar-fandom (and previous participatory experiences), as well as providing its own new method for analysing the types of CMC previously defined by Nancy Baym (1998), demonstrating a move into a more cyber-literate form of ethnography. My research will enable netnography to be applied to fan studies – a relationship that hitherto has not been explored in-depth (though briefly touched upon by Kozinets 2001, and Parmentier 2009), and as such will provide me with the tools to produce a significant, original thesis that will appeal on an interdisciplinary platform.

Methodological Process

Adopting a netnographic approach to my research, I began posting on the Board in January 2010. Although my entrée to the community will be discussed in depth in Chapter Two, I used my initial introductory steps to begin participating in Board activities on a regular basis. This first period of my activity on the Board (until the Board switched webspaces in July 2010) was characterised by relatively heavy use. From my first post on 13/01/10 until 09/07/10 I posted a total of 932 times, participating in a number of different topic threads.

The most frequent destination for my participation was the "I Thread". The thread was characterised by each new participant posting content with the

"I" pronoun before becoming a general chat forum. Each thread would typically run to around 100 pages before a new one would start, and although each new thread would be titled slightly differently – such as 'I... (Strong enough for a man but made by a woman)' (29/04/10) or 'I.... The "I" thread' (03/06/10) – no theme other than generalised chat was mandated. As a result, such a thread became one of the social hubs of the Board, where Boardies could talk about their day-to-day lives. As a netnographer looking to socialise, threads such as these became useful tools with which to integrate myself with other users.

For instance, on 26/03/10 in the 'I..... (Here we go again)' thread (12/03/10) I posted eight times over the course of approximately five hours,[11] conversing with people on topics as varied as cookie recipes (11:27; 15:00), music blogs (11:33), working in retail (14:31), haircuts (14:21; 15:42; 16:18), and relationships with in-laws (15:16). Although I didn't personally engage with each and every Boardie in this particular thread, my ability to frequently converse with a broad range of users in a relaxed and informal manner meant that my contribution to the community was at the very least visible (Kozinets 2010: 96), regardless of how valued it may have been.

This type of interaction typified my use of the Board, and began the formulation of my netnographic approach of hermeneutic analysis of the online space, a process described by Thompson et al. as:

> [An] iterative one in which a 'part' of the qualitative data (or text) is interpreted and reinterpreted in relation to the developing sense of the 'whole.' These iterations are necessary because a holistic understanding

---

[11] My activity on this day was not limited to the "I Thread": I also I posted in topic-specific threads on NBC series *The Office*, *Doctor Who*, video gaming, and pro wrestling.

must be developed over time. Furthermore, initial understandings of the text are informed and often modified as later readings provide a more developed sense of the text's meaning as a whole. (1994: 433)

As a result, my initial posting and reading on the Board was spent developing an understanding of what behaviour was considered appropriate for the community, and how the web space generally operated. This meant that when formulating potential research questions to ask Boardies, my interpretation of activity was inflected by my experience of posting and communicating on the site. In keeping with Thompson et al.'s definition of hermeneutic analysis, I spent four months learning 'the community's ritual practices, some of their central motivations and topical concerns, and the conversational practices that they use to build and maintain their community.' (Kozinets 2010: 124) Through a process of contributing to discussion and sharing experiences with Boardies, my scholar-fandom became influenced by community-specific knowledge, something Kozinets recommends is a requirement for netnographers in the field (2010: 125).

Attempting to craft a holistic understanding of the Board laid the groundwork for the beginning of my formal research process to take place on 12/05/10, four months on from my initial entrée. In detailing previous netnographic experience, Kozinets notes how he proposed a research question to a *Star Trek* newsgroup by asking "Is *Star Trek* like a Religion?":

> I cited some academic research indicating that *Star Trek* fans were like religious devotees, and then asked fans to comment on it. I also told them who I was, and invited them to learn more about my research. The somewhat controversial message worked well. … I had taken the time to understand the online community where I was posting my message. I took the time to fit my research questions and approach appropriately to the community. Probably assisted by my in-person fieldwork, I was acting like a genuine cultural participant. (2010: 93)

In the first four months actively spent on the Board, I had learned the

appropriate language and manner with which to approach potential research

participants. By immersing myself in the community, I was able to frame a

specific request for participation that would fully demonstrate my commitment

to my fannish and scholarly integrity:

> If you've ever happened across my first post or followed the link on my Board profile, you'll know that I am a PhD researcher looking at Kevin Smith fan culture. Being a fan myself, my study is in a sense autobiographical – essentially my current (fortunate) station in life is being a full-time Kevin Smith fan.
>
> I wrote in my initial thread that:
>> Quote:
>> I am here as me, to get to know people (by actually communicating rather than just being a voyeur!), and for people to get to know me. If at some point down the road you can help me in my research, that'll just be a bonus!
>
> Well now the time has come when I ask you, my fellow Boardies, to help me in my project. I know that on The Board there has previously been apprehension at people doing psychology or sociology "experiments" – deliberately trolling in order to get a response. That is why I reiterate now that I want this to be a collaborative project – a thesis that will benefit from your input, and be open and honest in it's findings. To that end, I've set up a blog where I'll document the progress of my study.
>
> Why am I doing this study? Well, I'm interested in fan culture and it annoys me that there are so many studies of fans of Star Trek or Buffy, but nothing has been published about View Askew fans. My study will change that. My work is not about "exposing" the fans or making them feel like they're part of a science experiment – it's about giving this unique, fascinating community a voice, and recognition within the academic world.
>
> How can you guys help? Over on my blog, I've posted a link to a questionnaire. If you could spare a few minutes of your time – whether you're a lurking Jizz Mopper or well-versed Metatron – I'd be eternally grateful.
>
> I'm also hoping to arrange some sort of presentation in Red Bank in August, so I can talk to people in person about my research aims, hopes, and intentions. If anyone has any questions/concerns etc, please fire away. (PeepingTom, Board post, 12/05/10)

The post here makes reference to my entrée to the Board, going so far as to quote directly from the original post to make evident both the length of my sustained communal activity, as well as the fact that I had made clear from the outset my intent to eventually research the fan community. In addition, my use of the term "fellow Boardies" reemphasises my place as part of the fan culture, and much like Kozinets, I make a point of welcoming discussion of my project, particularly wary of Boardies' scepticism resulting from untactful approaches from researchers in the past. Yet in contrast to Kozinets, rather than prompting participation with an external news source, I linked directly to my own research blog.

Similar to following Gatson and Zweerink's template for advising participants on the ethics of my study (as noted above), my survey design (Appendix One) also drew on their approach to the study of the Bronze (2004), which offered distinct sections according to demographic criteria and posting-board specific items. As such, my 18 survey questions were generally grouped around demographic information (1-6), details of involvement with the Board (7-9), online community (10-13), and Kevin Smith fandom (14-17) (with question 18 allowing for any other relevant information to be included). All questions were optional, with the exception of requiring a Board username and age, for screening purposes allowing for the nature of consent. This would allow any ineligible submissions to be discarded.

The survey was designed using Google Docs online software, with a link disseminated via my research blog. Rather than providing participants with

the link to the survey directly, I would intentionally filter traffic through my blog in order for users to have maximum exposure to the discursive context of my research: understanding my aims and rationale for the research before completing the survey.

The post asking for research participants was received well by Boardies, with the majority of responses simply stating that they had completed the survey (the functionality of the Board means this can be read implicitly as positive – with each new response the topic thread would jump to the top of the Board's front page, in turn displaying it prominently for other Boardies). Consistent online promotion helped to frequently remind/prompt Boardies to participant. Figure 4 shows the frequency of completions of the survey over a three-month period, punctuated by flashpoints of exposure.
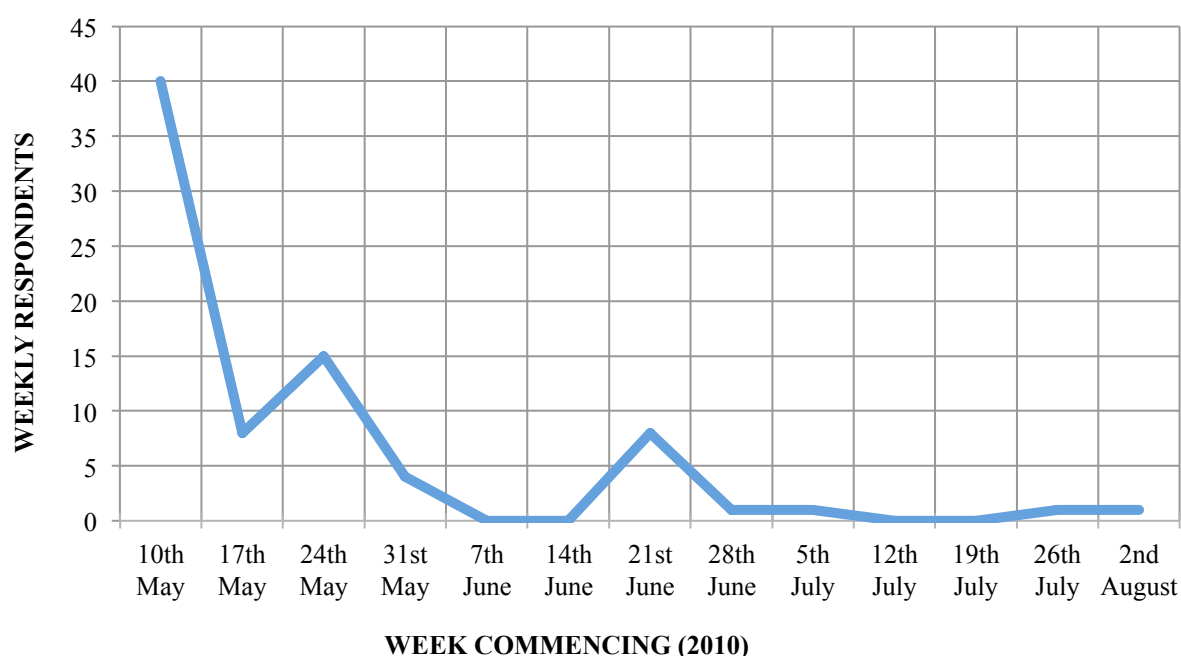
Figure 4: Weekly responses to the survey.

After a first week where 40 survey completions occurred, the next most

significant exposure came via Kevin Smith himself. Posting on Twitter, Smith

noted 'I appreciate what you're doing, [@TheTomPhillips]. Very much so.'

(Twitter, 24/05/10) By not including my username at the start of the Tweet,[12]

Smith made the address public to his 1.6 million followers, offering a tacit

endorsement of my research via his one to many address (Deller 2011).

Following this, I continued to promote the study on the Board via thread

bumping (purposely commenting on a dormant thread to heighten its visibility

on the Board), and it was from such a practice where another response spike

occurred in the week commencing 21/06/10.

Ultimately, the survey gleaned responses from 79 individuals, with

23,940 words written in response to the questions. The sample represents a

diverse spread of users, comprising a cohort of Boardies from Australia,

Canada, England, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland, and at least 27

different US states.[13] Boardies' internationality correlates with their

preponderance for online communication – 57% (n=45) of the sample post on

forums other than the Board. Although familiarity with computer-mediated-

communication will be further examined in Chapter Three, the strong tendency

for Boardies to use multiple outlets for interaction online suggests that

geographical proximity is not an overriding factor in conceptualising

community (a point that will be discussed in Chapter Six).

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[12] Tweet located at: https://twitter.com/ThatKevinSmith/status/14634421635
[13] Five respondents opted not to disclose their location. Others provided unspecific locations:
Bank HoldUp for instance described his location as 'All over the east coast NYC, NH, VT,
USVI, MD, FL' (Survey response, 15/05/10).

The sample also represents a spread of age ranges. At 18, Duff and Rocco were the youngest respondents, with Dianae the oldest at 53. Yet as Figure 5 indicates, there was a dominance of Boardies aged between 20 and 40, with this range comprising over three quarters of respondents.
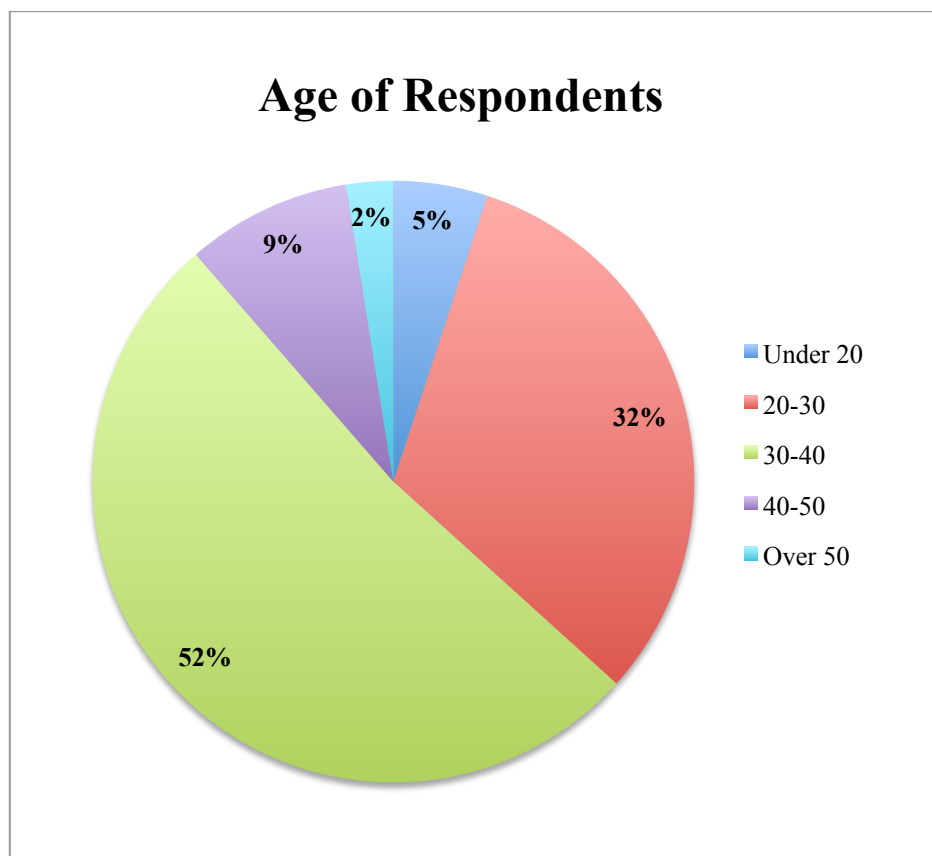
Figure 5: Age of survey respondents.

Such a spread correlates with the Pew Research Center's findings that over half of the adult internet population in 2009 was between 18 and 44 years old (Jones and Fox 2009). Yet perhaps more pertinent to this particular case study, this demonstrates that the majority of Boardies participating in my research are of the same generation as Kevin Smith (born in 1970). That Smith is of a similar age to many fans is not necessarily a causal factor to the close relationship they share, though the correlation of shared cultural experiences

and references is worthy of note. The closeness between Smith and Boardies will be further examined in Chapter One.

Finally, the sample also represents a spread of Boardies of varying degrees of longevity within the community, ranging from omega and Hawkboy who had each been posting since 1996, to Christea who completed the survey on the same day she signed up to the Board (15/05/10).[14] Figure 6 shows the varying years in which Boardies first began posting on the Board.
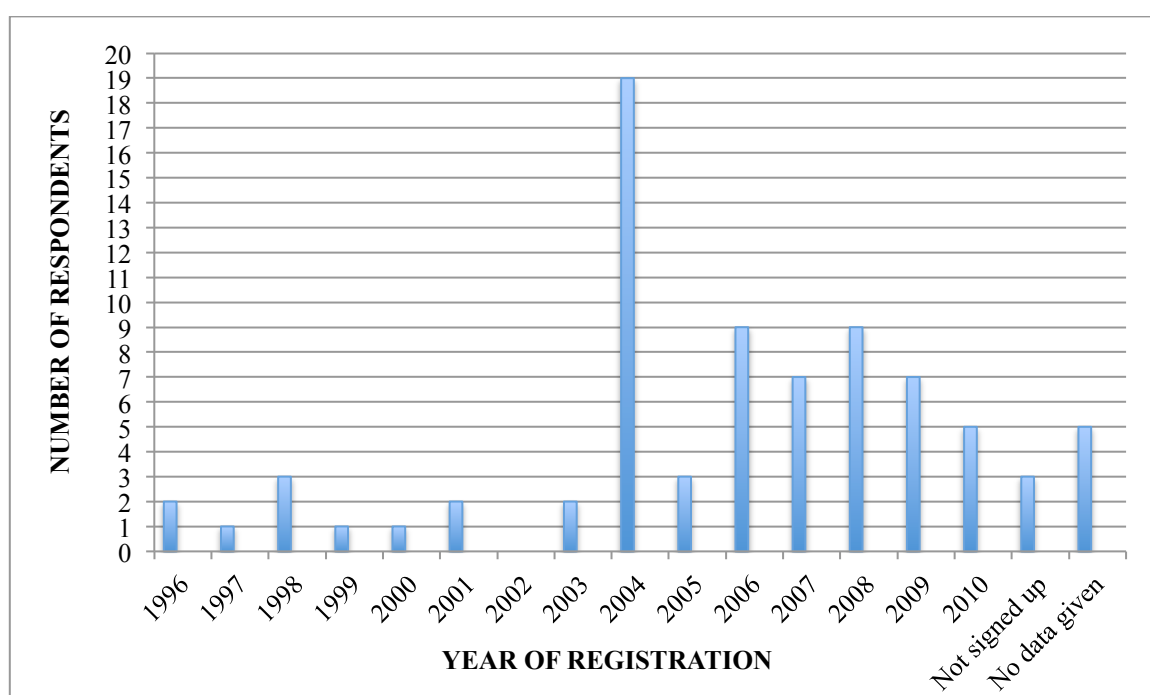
Figure 6: Year of respondent Board registration.

It is notable that the majority of respondents began posting on the Board from 2004 onwards. Despite this correlating with the introduction of new Board software, where registration was free for a brief introductory period before costing \$2, that many respondents began posting in a relatively latter period

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[14] In addition, three respondents were not active members of the Board, a phenomenon which will be further examined in Chapter Seven.

represents the strength of feeling they have for the community and the position

it holds in their lives and in their Kevin Smith fandom. Although the slight

imbalance between pre- and post-2004 registered respondents will not

necessarily be used to signify any particular conclusions, the fact that Boardies

still express a degree of closeness to Smith in spite of his increased usage of

other online outlets – such as his blog in 2005, MySpace in 2006, and Twitter

in 2008 – is perhaps significant.

As Kozinets notes, the skilled netnographer applies both hermeneutic

analysis and analytic coding (2010: 120-1), and it is this principal I follow in

beginning to analyse the survey responses. Rather than approaching the data

with a set of pre-set codes like those suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1992), I

used my participatory experience as an impetus with which to begin my

analysis, exploring themes in responses which reflected Board operation as I

interpreted it to occur. Considering broad aspects of sociality and community;

fandom and fannish practices; and interaction or reference to Smith and his

works, I began to systematically explore the data for recurrent patterns of

response. Using colour coding to visualise such patterns, I was able to identify

and categorise the dominant themes explored in this thesis.

In addition, this first round of analysis provided prompting material to

further interrogate particular responses from individual respondents. 58 of the

79 survey respondents provided contact details for the purpose of follow-up

interviews, and from 08/07/10 until 23/01/11 I contacted individuals by email

with questions specifically tailored to their survey responses and other fan

experiences (for instance follow-up interviews after a meetup, such as in

Section Two). Appendix Five details the 22 Boardies who responded to

requests for email interviews, and the frequency with which they responded to my questions.

In addition to directed questions aimed at specific participants, my hermeneutic interpretation of Board activity required reinterpretation in response to particular flashpoints. As will be noted in Chapter Four, the temporary closure of the Board – and the uncertainty amongst Boardies at the time – led to an opportune research moment. Donald Schon's conceptualisation of research as a varied topography of professional practice, with a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and a swampy lowland where situations are confusing "messes" incapable of technical solution is an apt comparison here (1983: 42).

Whilst my data analysis had followed a relatively linear path up to this point, this "swampy lowland" – a position where as a researcher I had to act fast to capitalise on an in-progress situation – required me to approach my research slightly differently. In this case, I directed a more generalised email (Appendix Two) to respondents, asking them to comment directly on an instance of Board activity not previously covered in the survey. The success of this method in engaging participants in discussion led me to send out a similarly broad email on 20/12/10 (Appendix Three). Although there was no instigating situation in the vein of the July 2010 Board shutdown, posing questions to a broad contingent of participants allowed me to gauge themes and attitudes in a similar manner to my combined hermeneutic and analytic coding method used for the survey data. Following this netnographic principle, I was able to once again form a dialogue with individuals based on their initial responses.

Finally, in a further response to changing research parameters, I decided to schedule live, face-to-face interviews during the weekend of Kevin Smith's 40th birthday in Red Bank, New Jersey, where Boardies would meet to attend a Smith Q&A show, and take part in fannish activities in Smith's hometown. The meetup provided the potential for me to meet some of my research participants in a fannish environment, and actively reflect on the difference between the on- and offline Kevin Smith fan culture (the analysis of this data will take place in Section Two).

As I later reflect in Chapter Five, one aspect of my scholar-fandom I had to reconcile was the notion of socialisation and research occurring within the same offline space. However, such tensions were established earlier in the planning stage for the meetup (and my role within it), as I established the Board's topic thread discussing the event and co-ordinating Boardies' activities:

> So I UTFS, and references to this event seem to be scattered all over the place, so I thought I'd consolidate the subject here.
>
> Has anyone bought tickets yet [to the Smith Q&A]? Including the Wonkaesque $500 ones [which include a meet and greet with Smith following the event]? I'm seriously thinking about heading over for this, but I'd like to see what the other festivities are going to be (or specifically, *when* they're going to be.
>
> Jen has confirmed that unfortunately the Count Basie Q&A on August 2nd, plus a hockey game the day before, is likely to be the only "official" View Askew event taking place in Red Bank. Though that's not to say Boardies cannot still meet up and have a blast . So use this thread to discuss possible meet ups/events/gatherings/parties etc that can take place over that weekend. (PeepingTom, Board post, 05/03/10)

Although ultimately I would cede leadership to those who had previously attended meetups and were more familiar with Red Bank and its surroundings, my active intent in administering the event led to more visibility for my

research plans, and the thread became a place on the Board where I could let potential participants know of my intent to attend meetup events in a scholar-fan capacity.

In terms of preparing for my time in Red Bank, I designed a semi-structured interview schedule which attempted to probe the difference between on- and offline "community" and the nature and appeal of offline Kevin Smith meetups (Appendix Four). Such a decision was taken precisely because of the scholar-fan context of my attendance; I felt that a more conversational mode of address would put participants at ease when my data collection was occurring in a primarily social space. Unlike my online research, where participants were directed to a dedicated research hub, my live interviews would take place within a number of different social contexts. A semi-structured interview schedule would allow reflection on key issues consistent to all participants, but allow deviation to consider the specific surroundings of the interview, and the particular personal context of the interviewee.

Ultimately my live interviewees deviated slightly from my originally planned sample. Whilst I had prearranged interviews with survey respondents and email correspondents specifically, the nature of the meetup – with some attendees previously unaccounted for in the Board thread noted above – allowed for some additional participants to be interviewed. I was able to seize the opportunity to interview individuals who expressed an interest in my research, and when practicalities necessitated.

For example, although unplanned, my interview with FiveStatesAway (01/08/10) became possible because we were both spectators during a street

hockey game. Rather than disregard FiveStatesAway's potential contribution

by waiting for my scheduled interviewees (participants in the game), in my

flexible approach to data collection I was able to gather material which

usefully informed my study (Section Two). Similarly, by including slithybill's

friend Bryan in the interview process whilst the three of us sat to breakfast, I

was able to gain a productive "outsider" perspective on meetups and Boardie

culture, something which helped shape my thoughts and understandings of how

the Board operates, and modified my sense of what the thesis would ultimately

interrogate (Chapter Seven). Analysis of the 14 interviews (with 16

participants) followed a similar process to the first two stages of data

collection. Following partial transcription of the interview audio I cross-

referenced the data with codes already established, and made note of any new

themes.

The presentation of this data in the thesis, along with that derived from

the survey and email interviews, makes no attempt to prioritise particular

voices or subject positions. Rather, those voices chosen for analysis represent

the summation of a hermeneutic and data analysis coding process, in line with

that recommended by Kozinets.

Thesis Outline

This thesis is primarily derived from data gleaned from a number of

participants. Firstly, a preliminary online survey recruited 79 respondents from

a fan community whose active participants numbered approximately 300. From

these initial respondents, 22 provided follow-up interviews via email, before 16

participants were interviewed face-to-face (and later transcribed) during a research trip to New Jersey, US. The results of this data is analysed through three sections, comprised of seven chapters.

Section One, 'Experiential Contexts of Practice', considers Boardies in relation to John Fiske's triumvirate model of fan productivities. The section offers an insight into the functionality of the View Askew Message Board, and how communal interaction is inflected by online conventions, historical knowledge, and regular contact with Kevin Smith. The section uses survey responses and email interviews to sketch the contours of the online operation of fan culture on the Board.

Section Two, 'Offline Backchannelling' builds on this depiction by examining how the community operates in an offline context. Based on fieldwork interviews in Red Bank, New Jersey at a Kevin Smith meetup, the section gives a sense of how digital community transfers to the physical, while offering a template that suggests it does not always need to be a sequential process. Questioning notions of on- and offline "community" and a supposed "real"/"virtual" binary, this section presents a construction of Boardie identity that surpasses such oppositions. Instead, offline activity can account just as readily for fans' cultural experience.

The final section, 'Fan Taxonomies', examines Boardie activity relative to the fan experience of those who do not participate on the Board. Questioning the methodological issues with searching for an "excluded", "unstudied" contingent of fans, the section offers a broader examination of wider Kevin

Smith fan culture, offering a comparison between communal and individual fan practice.

The thesis conclusion considers the findings within a broader methodological and ethical framework, examining the extent to which fan community is reliant on tangible boundaries, and how a thesis-length study over a number of years can remain consistent with alterations to an ongoing group of people. Ultimately the thesis will explore the extent to which "fandom" is an appropriate term for the study of such a culture, and how far beyond being "just" fans participants conceive themselves.

Section One

Experiential Contexts of Practice

> I don't think that anyone who posts is not a Kevin Smith fan. The
> entire board is set up for him, by him, and about him. … [W]hat
> brought everyone there is being a fan … in one way or another. (Talos,
> email interview, 28/09/10)

Discussing the function of the View Askew Message Board as a space in which

to practice Kevin Smith fandom, Talos demonstrates the way in which

declaration of fandom and participation in fan practices become an inherent

and assumed facet of one's membership to a message board that, since its

inception, has operated as the official outlet for those seeking to express and

share an admiration for Smith. In citing the Board's apparent origin as a space

dedicated to furthering fandom, Talos makes explicit the assumption that

Boardies – and therefore all those participating in this study – are Kevin Smith

fans.

For the researcher, such an assumption is initially methodologically

liberating. In avoiding the direct questioning of "Why are you a fan of … ?"

(Hills 2002: 66), fandom is positioned as a given, and subsequently allows an

examination of how fandom informs participation in an online environment.

Adopting Talos' viewpoint, this section can ask not *why* the users of the View

Askew Message Board are Kevin Smith fans, but *how* that fandom informs the

practices of this particular culture. In order to understand the manner in which

Kevin Smith fandom is defined, practised, and articulated, this section will

present key contexts as identified by fans, reflecting the product of

hermeneutic analysis of my initial questionnaire and follow-up email

interviews.

In detailing his methodology for his 2010 study of *Doctor Who* fandom,

Matt Hills notes the genus of the term "fan discourse", observing:

> Foucault argues that discourses enable and constrain cultural meanings,
> constituting objects of understanding. Discourses are "ways of making
> sense of the world" (McKee 2003: 101) linked to specific communities
> and institutions, which is why we can analyse specifically …
> "conventional fan discourse". (Hills 2010: 14)

Hills goes on to note how Michele Pierson (2002) 'refers to "fan discourse"

more generally, as a way of understanding and interpreting special effects that

is shared across different fantasy/SF/action film fandoms,' and Daniel

O'Mahony's use of the term (2007) is 'meant specifically in relation to *Who*

fan culture(s)' (2010: 20-1, n.60).

However, Tim Rapley notes the way in which the interpretation of

discourse is contextual, where bias on the part of the researcher removes

neutrality, thus revealing there is no "truth" or history (2007: 2-3). Citing

social constructionist Vivian Burr (1995), Rapley notes 'Put simply, our

understanding of things, concepts or ideas that we might take for granted … is

not somehow *natural* or *pre-given* but rather is the product of human actions

and interactions, human history, society and culture.' (2007: 4)

As a result, I steer away from a fixed, binaried interpretation of Board

activity that could be categorised as "fan discourse"; prescriptive analysis

which limits how participants' behaviour can be considered. Instead, I turn to a

more democratic mode of addressing dominant contexts of Boardies'

experiences. These experiential contexts of mutual affirmation, history as

semiotic resource, regularity and computer-mediated-communication, and acquiescence to producorial power present an account of how Boardie experience is shaped and conceptualised, questioning the extent to which Kevin Smith "fandom" and "fan practice" are acceptable terms to describe Boardie activity.

Whilst Talos notes that the Board was '*set up* for [Smith], by [Smith], and about [Smith]' (Email interview 28/09/10, my emphasis) as this section will demonstrate, the Board and its position as locus of the Smith fan culture operates as a communal gateway, a portal accessed because of Kevin Smith fandom that then becomes a conduit facilitating social relationships between likeminded people. This section will argue, then, that in accordance with Fiske's notion of fan productivity, the Boardies' experiential contexts demonstrate that the culture of the View Askew Message Board functions in "traditional" ways, but with "untraditional" intent. However, such an analysis has the potential to be reductive – placing an emphasis on the dominant productivities of Kevin Smith fandom rather than embracing the intricacies of the community. Aware of this problem in his discussion of Fiske's work (and that of Jenkins) Crawford notes that:

> Fans are … always seen as active, and the wider population as invariably passive, but such over-generalizations rarely hold true for all fans, or wider audiences, all of the time. Moreover, it is only the 'active' type of audience … that are seen as worthy of consideration and study (2012: 103)

Similarly, in his own disclaimer preceding his triumvirate model, Fiske recognises that 'any example of fan productivity may well span all categories and refuse any clear distinctions among them'. (1992: 37) It would therefore

seem apt to also consider Boardie activity in terms of enunciative, textual, *and* semiotic productivities, even if the evidence for a respective productivity is weak. Therefore, I will examine Boardies' experiential contexts of mutual affirmation, history as semiotic resource, regularity and computer-mediated-communication, and acquiescence to producorial power to inform a conceptualisation of Kevin Smith fandom/Board functionality in relation to how productivities are enabled and prevented, addressing Fiske's triumvirate model in full.

Beginning with a more explicit and recognisable example of "fan" articulation, Chapter One examines a context of mutual affirmation, whereby Boardies seek to have their practices ratified by Smith in his role as fellow participant in the culture. Recognising respondents' positioning of Smith's hierarchal dominance of the Board, the affirmation context examines Boardie responses to Smith's self-professed "open" producorial discourse, demonstrating how in contrast to the 'non-reciprocal relation of intimacy' (Thompson 1995: 222) common to fan cultures, the apparent "friendship" that comprises the affirmation context complicates ideas of producer-fan relations.

Examining how the relationship with Smith impacts on the nature of Smith fan practice, Chapter Two identifies a context of history as semiotic resource, demonstrating how a cumulative understanding of appropriate Board etiquette, based on user experience, informs Boardies' behaviour. The nature of such a context – notable for its focus on knowledge of Board operation rather than capital in relation to aspects of Kevin Smith or View Askew – again questions the relevance of the primary fan text to the culture.

Chapter Three examines a context of regularity and computer-mediated-communication, detailing the manner in which participation on the Board comes to constitute a normalised, everyday practice that is in keeping with wider contemporary CMC practices rather than fan cultures specifically. The section discusses how Boardies' shift of emphasis from a fandom of Smith to an apparent "fandom" of each other questions the extent to which implied or assumed fandom can be regarded as a functional signifier of fan culture.

Finally as a cumulative response to the aforementioned contexts Chapter Four addresses the complexity of Smith-Boardie relations, identifying the way in which forms of Boardie activity are willingly suppressed – through the processes of mutual affirmation – constituting a new context of acquiescence to Smith's producorial power. The chapter explores how Boardies' behaviour is regulated according to criteria established by Smith, demonstrating that in the "official" space of Smith fan culture, fan practice is not democratic. Despite the context of mutual affirmation supporting notions of fan articulation, analysis of Boardie acquiescence to Smith's producorial rhetoric demonstrates that a fan space need not adhere to traditional aspects of fan culture.

Section One therefore examines fan-identified contexts that question the centrality of fandom and fan practices to Board culture. It establishes the way in which the Board functions in an online space, and the resultant contexts identified will be used in Sections Two and Three to compare how Smith fan practices function both offline and in "unofficial" online spaces.

Chapter One

Mutual Affirmation

Throughout his career, Kevin Smith has frequently cited his appreciation of the communicative properties of the Internet in order to be more accessible to his fans. Although the notion of participatory producers has been previously examined such as the *Buffy* "VIPs" like Joss Whedon who would visit the Bronze (Gatson and Zweerink 2004: 9), or J. Michael Straczynski's interaction with *Babylon 5* fans (Lancaster 2001: 1-33), Smith frames his participatory practices as being particularly noteworthy, remarking 'I'll post and throw up stuff that you don't normally see. I try and give people access to not just me and the production company, but also try to close that mysterious gap that some filmmakers like to leave between them and the audience.' (Ross 1999) Smith emphasises his relative "closeness" with his online audience in comparison with other industry figures, believing himself to be more successful at "closing the gap" between producer and audience. Although such an observation may be in response to interviewers' questions – indeed, critical discourse often references Smith's fan interactions (Breznican 2006; Thomson 2006; Godfrey 2011) – as noted in the Introduction, Smith has stridently volunteered such analysis with great frequency in his own publications (Smith 2005; 2007; 2012).

Smith's self-congratulatory stance on his relationship with fans – identifying it as one of "symbiosis" (Smith 2009b) – is reflected in the credit he takes for establishing the View Askew Message Board as an official fan

space. Paying tribute to employee and webmaster Ming Chen in a reflection on the ten year anniversary of the Board, Smith notes how 'www.viewaskew.com became the stage from which we grew our audience and met so many of the folks who've kept me employed for the last ten years … keeping in touch with those folks has made all the difference in not just my career, but my life as well.' (2007: 323) The celebratory tone of the reflective piece demonstrates Smith's personal, as well as professional, gratitude to his interactions with his online audience.

Smith and Board Functionality

As noted in the Introduction, Smith has been heavily influential in the formation of the Board as a space to celebrate his works, and his noteworthy "gap closing" practices between producer and audience have taken the form of regular posting on the Board itself, interacting with other users and integrating himself into his own fan culture in a sustained, consistent manner.

In an email to Ming planning the formation of viewaskew.com in 1995 (preceding that cited above), Smith shared his vision for the inclusion of other content on the site:

> [It would have a] *Clerks* section, which we can update periodically with any pertinent info ... I've got a slew of pix that have never seen print we can put up there ... a *Mallrats* section, with all the same trimmings ...There's a slew of footage that didn't make it into the flick, so we can include them as quick time movies if you want (people would love that – it'd be the only place to see the lost footage, as the geniuses at MCA are only issuing a standard letterboxed version of the flick on laser disc, without any cool extras). (2007: 322-3)

Rather than a community founded by fans to collate interests and forge fan alliances (Jenkins 1992), Smith's spearheading of his own site demonstrates his active role in curating a fan-friendly space. Notable, his insistence on the site's features demonstrates that his vision is for a website specifically catering for a fan audience. For example, his inclusion of additional film content MCA had neglected to include on laser disc releases demonstrates his fannish stance toward his own work, and an indication of how his work was to be lauded within the space.
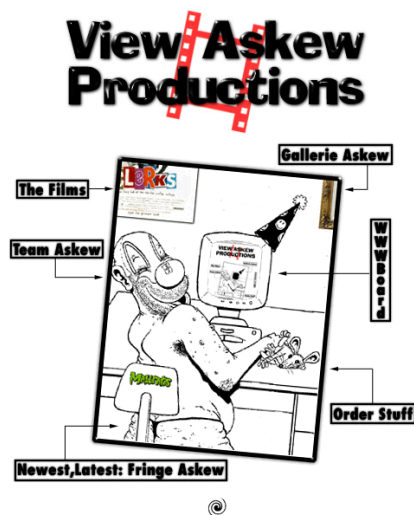
Figure 7: The ViewAskew.com homepage, c.1995.

ViewAskew.com thusly began as a space where discussion between Smith and fans was not the only facet of its design. The home page of the site (Figure 7) reveals how the Board was just one aspect of content designed to facilitate Smith's status as fans' 'buddy who suddenly won the lottery of life.' (Smith

2009b) It was the promotion of this persona on the Board in particular that allowed this aspect of ViewAskew.com to flourish, largely in part to Smith's commitment to participating in discussion.

The first iteration of the Board has come to be known as the "White Board" (Figure 8). Referring to its plain black-text-on-white-background aesthetic, the White Board was threaded, meaning that a user could begin topic threads and have others respond to them. The design of the Board meant that all replies to threads could be visible at once, and as a result the Board would be periodically "turned-over" when too many responses filled the screen. Previous Boards were archived, and a new one free of content would begin.

Figure 8: The White Board.

Smith's presence on the Board was frequent and relatively unextraordinary.

Figure 8 makes evident that Smith's initiation and participation of threads

(posting under the username "Kevin") was not necessarily a special event

which provoked a subsequent flurry of activity. The normalisation of Smith's

activity is reaffirmed by the specific link at the top of the page to archived

turned-over Boards:

> Older boards dating from February 3rd, 1998 to March 30th, 1998
>
> **NOTE:** These boards are for archival purposes only. Please do not
> POST or REPLY to any of the messages on these boards. It will not
> work
> The Boards
>
> **WWWBoard 78** (137K)
> The most requested archived board - Oscar winners **Ben Affleck** and
> **Matt Damon** hit our humble home away from home days before their
> Oscar win.
>
> **WWWBoard 82** (107K)
> **Ben Affleck** hits the board and talks about his Oscar win. Also see this
> message for Ben's thank you's to **Kevin** and **Scott**.(Note - posts on the
> bottom of this board are screwy)
>
> **WWWBoard 79** (143K)
> **Linda Fiorentino** and **Chris Rock** talk about working on Dogma with
> Kevin and Mewes.
>
> **WWWBoard 80** (193K)
> **Jason Mewes** answers questions and insults posters on the board. Oscar
> thoughts before, during and after the awards ceremony.[15]

As the only archived posts highlighted on the White Board, these links make

clear the way in which Smith's participation is considered, particularly in

comparison to other celebrities. Kerry Ferris notes that celebrity journalism

frequently attempts strategies which bring celebrities "down to earth", 'to make

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[15] Located at: http://viewaskew.com/oldboards/

them easy to relate to, to cut through the glitz and glamour. When the strategy

is successful, fans feel a rapport with the celebrity, based on knowledge about

shared elements of everyday life.' (2001: 31-2) The same strategy occurs here

on the Board, with celebrities' use of the space constituting an instance where

their interaction with fans is seemingly outside of the mediated constructs of a

formal interview.

In the presentation of this archive, Smith is similarly positioned as a

Boardie for whom the visitation of celebrities is a notable event: Ben Affleck's

public address to Smith (Board post, 27/03/98) was specifically linked, and

rather than Smith being positioned as a cultural practitioner whose industry

contacts allowed Affleck's *Good Will Hunting* screenplay to be filmed, the

moment is instead framed as "Oscar winner Ben Affleck" taking the time to

specifically mention a user of the Board. Smith's circumnavigation of mediated

press – communicating directly with fans from one end of an internet

connection – signals how his "down to earth-ness" codes him in this instance

as a Boardie, rather than a celebrity.

In 2004 Smith made the decision to move the Board to another forum

host, adopting phpBB forum software to open what he termed the Board v.2

(Board post, 07/05/04). His last post on the White Board demonstrates the

esteem in which he held the community:

> I'm gonna miss this place. … I'm a sentimental fuck, so I'll miss this
> simple format. But sometimes, you've gotta grow; accept change.
>
> And all sentimentality to the side, this isn't the board. This is just the
> technology by which we conduct our ongoing conversations. All of you
> and me - everyone who posts... WE'RE the board. The look of the place
> may be changing, but the spirit? That's been the same since we started

> this little chat, nearly ten years ago. And that spirit will carry over to the next incarnation of this virtual clubhouse.
>
> […]
>
> Click the link below and the future is your's.
>
> The board is dead. Long live the board. (Smith, Board post, 10/05/04)

In contrast to Bertha Chin and Matt Hills' analysis of producer Javier Grillo-Marxuach's interactions with fans, where they note the producer/fan distinctions are very clearly demarcated (2008: 266), here Smith complicates such distinctions in his commitment to the Board community. Using inclusive language to stress his point, Smith identifies as a Boardie, rather than the fan object of the community; his fan identity is inextricably tied up into the posts he makes, complicating his position as a media celebrity by referring to the Board community in a friendly manner.

The coding of the producer-fan relationship in personal terms, derived from Smith's initiation of the Board and participation in online communication and practices, is also particularly notable for being similarly cited as a main source of appeal for Boardies' respective commencement of their own practices: as Hawkboy notes, Smith's interaction with fans is 'one of the biggest reasons I've been a fan of his for the last 14 years.' (Survey response, 12/05/10) As noted above, Thompson believes that it is common for fandom to be 'rooted in a non-reciprocal relation of intimacy' (1995: 222), and in presenting a contrast to this paradigm, the contextual functionality of the relationship between Smith and the Boardies considers the extent to which a culture founded on mutual affirmation – the reciprocal ratification of producer

and Boardie identities via consistent interaction – can be labelled one of fandom.

Nancy Baym notes that 'People affirm identities by responding to the posts of individuals who demonstrate desirable qualities, by identifying noteworthy individuals by name in their posts, and (perhaps most important) through praise,' (2000: 171) and the establishment of the experiential context of mutual affirmation at this stage of Section One provides an entry point into fan interpretation of Board functionality, providing a contextual background as well as an interrogation of the dynamic of producer-fan relations, that can be subsequently examined in the following chapters. On noting his "symbiotic" relationship with fans, Smith notes:

> It's enormously flattering when someone (or lots of someones) are interested in you enough as an artist to wanna know about your life and opinions *beyond* the actual work that brought you to their attention in the first place. ... So, sure – I have a tendency to "overshare." But it's brought so many cool people into my life as a result that it's worth the lack of privacy. (2009b)

This "oversharing" nature continued with the launch of the Board v.2 in 2004, as Smith would post openly about his sexual relationship with wife Jennifer Schwalbach:

> Today's the seventh anniversary of the first time Jen and I ever kissed and fucked. And fucked. And fucked. And fucked. And fucked.

> This day, more than any other, is proof positive that one excellent lay can change your whole life forever.

> Happy Anniversary, Babe.

> Now take those fucking pj's off and let's relive a fond memory. (Board post, 21/05/05)

As the concluding paragraphs to a lengthy retelling of Smith and Schwalbach's first date, Boardies' responses to the post were warm; variously exclaiming congratulations, the fact that Smith had made them cry, and wishing the couple well in their apparently imminent coitus. Smith's "oversharing" would initially seem to conform to P. David Marshall's theorisation of the celebrity transgressive intimate self, an online identity motivated by temporary emotion where information passes online because of its visceral quality of being closer to the core of the being:

> What may have appeared appropriate for one's closest friends is, in this case, shared with hundreds of thousands who pass it on virally to millions. … Transgression remains a beacon in on-line or off-line form for fans and audiences to see a persona's true nature exposed and the event/moment for intercommunicative sharing, comment and discussion. (2010: 45)

Smith's open and frank admission of information that arguably most would consider private would appear to correlate with Marshall's suggestion of a mismanagement of celebrity persona; a moment when the barriers between public and private spaces are knocked down unintentionally. However, In *deliberately* "oversharing" information he recognises as private, Smith maintains a celebrity who shares intentionally provocative material in order to develop shared interests between an audience and a projected persona of identifiable celebrity.

Significantly, connotations of this persona can be seen in the post above in the use of direct address to Schwalbach, as a key aspect of the Board v.2 is Schwalbach's own frequent use of the Board. Being directly addressed by her husband here, that Schwalbach would read the post is a given for Boardies, as one of the most popular recurring threads on the Board is one initially

established as a dedicated Q&A for Schwalbach. "The Jen Thread" – which after 43 iterations became known as "The Den Thread" – is Schwalbach's primary location for posting activity, comprising the majority of her 16,434 posts on Board v.2.

As Smith's wife, Schwalbach's role on the Board expanded to one of ownership of the space by proxy, but rather than necessarily signifying a further strata of hierarchy, Schwalbach's presence helps to further solidify Smith's identifiable celebrity persona. By sharing content herself, she adds to the supposedly private information Boardies can consume about Smith, allowing a further facet to reception of the couple as 'intimate strangers' (Ferris and Harris 2011: 31).

Yet perhaps notably, Smith and Schwalbach have gone out of their way to make clear the importance of their relationships with Boardies, and Smith's understanding of "oversharing" as a taboo concept demonstrates his awareness that his image may not necessarily conform to traditional expectations of how a producer may be expected to interact with audiences. Tears In Rain makes a direct correlation in this manner, noting 'I do not think George Lucas or Spielberg would play hockey or poker with fans or do as many events or signings as Kevin.' (Survey response, 13/05/10) Akin to Smith's aforementioned self-categorisation, here his actions are similarly framed in relation to other media producers. Such distinctions hint at Smith's online interaction with fans comprising a knowing mediation of binaries of powerful and powerless (McKee 2004: 169), actively courting an online audience who may have been previously stung by the 'gross imbalance between the individual viewer and corporate producer' (Brooker 2002: 98) such as the

relationship between George Lucas and *Star Wars* fans, which is often categorised in terms of increasing divergence in critical and popular discourse (O'Neal 2012).

"Personal" Interaction

Boardie categorisation of Smith's communication habits is therefore placed in relation to other known dynamics of producer-audience hierarchy, accepting Smith's own conception of his practices; that the apparent closeness and realness of his celebrity image to the fans creates a relationship that is experienced first-hand, and is essentially meaningful to both parties (Redmond 2006: 35). Avoiding claims that the View Askew Message Board is particularly special – babydoll notes that Kevin Smith fandom is 'very similar to being fans of anything that has some sort of cult status' (Survey response 12/05/10) – the Boardies instead use the perception of Smith's relative interactivity as a signifier of specifically Board operation.

Following up his similar assertion that 'It's not unique that fans would choose an artist or subject to obsess about or follow around,' Tarhook states 'I think the difference is [Smith's] interaction. … And not in a typical "Q&A" setting, but real life interaction. … [I]t's that the artist opened up to [fans] which makes the whole thing different.' (Survey response 17/05/10) Rather than identifying as a media producer, Smith instead relies on a rhetorical device which uses ordinariness, authenticity, and "reality" as a point of reference for contemporary celebrity (Redmond 2006: 28).

Although conceptually and theoretically problematic – a point that will be more closely examined in Section Two – the term "real life" 'suggests another place, a separate and distinct realm away from online venues,' reflecting the presence of the oppositional binary of "real" versus "virtual" that exists in Western culture (Tuszynski 2008: 10). However, Tarhook's use of the phrase here does not suggest a separation of on- and offline interaction. Instead, he is using the term to refer to the Boardies' perception of Smith presenting a "genuine" persona on the Board, rather than the mediated "performance" that Smith may portray in other contexts. Again, Boardie perception of Smith's behaviour and involvement in the culture relies on comparative statements and a process of deferral: that Smith acts in particular ways to some audiences, but offers a privileged insight to just the Boardies. Interaction with Smith is subsequently coded by Boardies as being a more personal construct than might be expected of 'every other celebrity … [from the] fantasy-land that is Hollywood,' (babydoll, Survey response, 12/05/10) apparently confirming Smith's self-perception as one who is able to "close the gap" between producer and audience.

The perceived success of such "gap closing" – or the apparently successful mediation of powerful/powerless binaries – appears to be founded in Smith's commitment to "oversharing", for as Hannah notes, 'We have become accustomed to having this man who keeps no secrets from us as far as his life goes.' (Survey response 12/05/10). Smith's established behavioural mode of vulgarity and coarseness adds to a persona that is defined by the open and frank admission of information that arguably most would consider private, yet it is the nature of these "overshared" moments that frick. categorises as being

particularly important to Smith-Boardie relation, citing the *manner* in which he communicates as significant: 'Now … many renowned people are as accessible as Kevin was before, but I still like the WAY he communicates with fans … [he] seems more conversational than a lot of other celebs.' (Survey response, 27/06/10)

Again framing Smith's activity in relation to other producers, frick. cites Smith's longevity as a communicative producer and tone of correspondence, emphasising his commitment to a sustained relationship that is perceived as operating on a more colloquial basis than other producer-fan relationships. Frick.'s interpretation of Smith's "conversational" mode of address speaks to the personal inflection of the Smith-Boardie relationship. In the face of new opportunities to engage with more "renowned people" or "celebs" via contemporary CMC outlets such as Twitter, frick. categorises Smith's activity as resolutely more personal – that even though he still enjoys a hierarchal status as celebrity or object of fandom – he is still able to follow through on his aforementioned belief that he is "closing the gap" between producer and audience.

Hills notes that 'Tulloch and Jenkins' rendering of fans as "powerless elite" tends to place all fans in a similar position of cultural (dis)empowerment relative to media producers and professionals, suggesting that fans can be thought of in clear opposition to media-professional celebrities.' (2006: 102) At this point, taking into account fan perception of the "closed gap" between themselves and Smith, the Boardies would appear to be a direct contrast to this paradigm of power, inflecting "media-professional celebrity" Smith as "just another guy": babydoll, for example, believes that Smith's sustained

interaction 'shows people that Kevin is still just a guy, and I think this has helped him keep so many fans.' (Survey response 12/05/10) In crediting Smith's popularity with his apparent "normality", babydoll demonstrates Smith's apparent success in his bid to be closer to his online audience in comparison with other industry figures, and codes the Smith-Boardie relationship in personal, rather than professionally mediated, terms.

Fandom Between Friends?

Sean Redmond notes that 'Contemporary fame speaks and is spoken about through the language of intimacy … [drawing] stars/celebrities and fans/consumers into ever decreasing circles of affective connectivity' (2006: 36). The personal nature of this relationship therefore questions the intricacies of Boardies' practices. If – through a process of Boardies' affirmation of his practices – Smith has been interpreted as successful in "closing the gap", and the relationship between himself and Boardies is one of friendship, then the role of fandom is called into question. To return to the work of Jenkins cited above, he suggests that being part of a fan culture is an inherent struggle, meaning that 'To speak as a fan is to accept what has been labelled a subordinate position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticized by institutional authorities.' (1997: 507) If the Boardies regard themselves in opposition to concepts of cultural disempowerment, and share an apparently "equal" relationship with the normalised Smith, can their position be considered one of fandom?

Although the specifics of what may constitute Boardies' "fan practice" will be covered throughout this section, what can be considered at this point is whether a "personal" dynamic completely eradicates notions of producer-fan hierarchies, or whether such hierarchies exist behind a façade of power balance. Leaning towards a reading of the latter, the remainder of this chapter will detail how the mutual affirmation context reflects Boardies' – rather than Smith's – Board practice, demonstrating how although Board activity has been categorised in personal, non-fannish terms, a hierarchy favouring Smith influences interaction. It should be noted that much in the way that McKee unpacks notions of so readily applying binaries in order to understand structures (2004: 167-85), the relationship between Kevin Smith and the Boardies is not so easily understood in terms of "personal"/"professional" or "friends"/"fans". As a result establishing an interpretation of the Smith-Boardie relationship in order to frame the section's further discussion of experiential contexts – whilst not discounting the testimony of Boardies who *do* claim friendship with Smith – will begin to detail how Smith's producorial rhetoric informs Board behaviour.

To return to her discussion of the value system that shaped identity construction on the rec.arts.tv.soap Usenet group, Nancy Baym notes that participants:

> … continually reinforce group values by validating and honouring some identities but not others. People affirm identities by responding to the posts of individuals who demonstrate desirable qualities, by identifying noteworthy individuals by name in their posts, and (perhaps most important) through praise. … Online identities are built out of, and situated in response to, a group of other voices and a value system that makes some types of voices more appealing than others. (2000: 171, 173)

In the responses thus far, the Smith-Boardie relationship has been touted as apparently "balanced", ratifying Smith's self-conception as the interactive, caring producer. Yet this process of affirmation operates in the other direction, whereby Boardies' online participation in the culture is ratified by a direct acknowledgement from Smith. Returning to Talos' view that what brought users to the Board 'is being a fan [of Smith's] … in one way or another,' (Email interview 28/09/10) it is possible to place Smith's position in the culture as being more significant and appealing for Boardies (in contrast to the position of other Boardies) because of his hierarchal role as subject of the fan culture, perhaps reflecting a more parasocial (Horton and Wohl 1956) process of interaction then previously articulated.

For instance, in response to a request for any other information relevant to my study, Tears In Rain highlights that 'Kevin has done countless things for me … the biggest thing is agreeing to marry me and my girl Nikki next year.' (Survey response 13/05/10). Referring to the same event, Hannah notes 'I will be a part of a board wedding in which Kevin will be officiating next year. The two getting married met on the board. I think that speaks volumes on our community and what it has done.' (Survey response 12/05/10) Although such an intimate action may seem to reaffirm the personal nature of the Smith-Boardie relationship,[16] what is significant in the admissions from Tears In Rain and Hannah is that Smith's participation in particular is strongly emphasised. With the exception of Tears In Rain's bride, other Boardies involved in the

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[16] In fact, as an Internet-ordained minister from the Universal Life Church, Smith has monetized his ability to officiate weddings, offering his services for a fee.

service are not identified by name – only Smith is deemed important enough to be explicitly named – highlighting his hierarchal importance to the Board culture and subsequent activities.

Such an acknowledgment of Smith's hierarchal position has influenced Boardie practice more directly. In contrast to babydoll's interpretation of Smith as "just a guy", Talos references Smith's participation thusly: 'we were [on the Board] to honor Kevin, and for him to walk amongst us was awesome, wonderful, and he never treated anyone like a lesser being.' (Survey response, 14/07/10) In his deification of Smith, Talos establishes Smith's participation as an extraordinary practice, adhering to Kerry Ferris' belief that 'When a fan comes face-to-face with a celebrity, worlds collide and dichotomies collapse. The ordinary and the extraordinary meet, reality and fantasy merge' (2001: 26).[17] Rather than Smith being identified as a knowable entity who can become a friend, Talos instead expresses the Smith-Boardie relationship in terms of fantasy, ascribing Smith's presence on the Board (and subsequent interaction with Boardies) as an overwhelming, almost spiritual, experience.

Although the preceding content of this chapter suggests equality can exist between Smith and the Boardies, these testimonies complicate such a reading because of their placement of Smith as hierarchal leader of the Board culture. Such an interpretation means that in his communication with Boardies, Smith becomes the "most appealing voice" (Baym 2000: 173), whose position in the culture allows a validation of Boardie activity on a large

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[17] Kerry Ferris categorises celebrity-fan encounters in much the same way as McKee, highlighting binaries that challenge the boundaries separating reality from fantasy, audience from per- former, fame from mundanity, fan from celebrity. (2001: 28)

scale. Validation of a number of Boardies – all claiming a personal relationship to Smith – is possible because of the nature of parasocial interaction, where celebrity personae:

> … can claim and achieve an intimacy with … literally crowds of strangers, and this intimacy, even if it is an imitation and a shadow of what is ordinarily meant by that word, is extremely influential with, and satisfying for, the great numbers who willingly receive it and share in it. (Horton and Wohl 1956: 216)

Such influence on and validation of Boardie practices is apparent in the response from Funployee109 who, exemplifying Ferris' belief that producer-fan encounters result in an element of "trophy seeking" (2001: 28), volunteered his 'favorite Board moment of all time' (Survey response, 12/05/10), linking to a saved screen capture of a moment when Smith had addressed him on the Board (Figure 9). By classifying the moment in this manner, Funployee109 demonstrates how his Board experience has been informed by an instance of Smith addressing him directly, thereby providing a validation of his activity from the hierarchal leader of the culture.
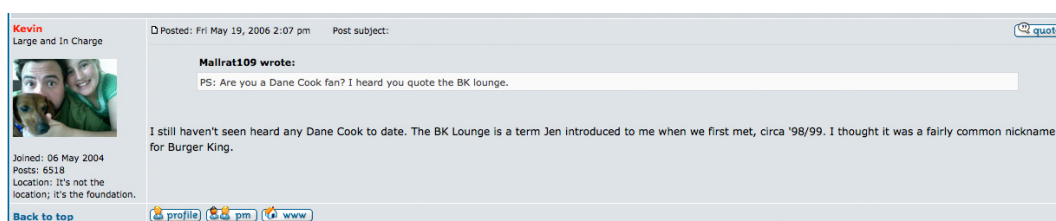
Figure 9: Funployee109's 'favorite Board moment of all time'.

In the citation of direct recognition – four years prior – from Smith as a particularly important moment in his own Board history, Funployee109

demonstrates how he believes the process of affirmation marked him as holding qualities particularly appealing to Smith – in this case, a shared sense of humour. Funployee109's own online identity was subsequently imbued with the knowledge that a noteworthy participant – *the* noteworthy participant – of the culture finds his contributions worthy of interacting with. Reflecting Sandvoss' argument that 'the object of fandom … is intrinsically interwoven with our sense of self, with who we are, would like to be, and think we are,' (2005: 96), Smith's influence on Funployee109 hints at his position as a personal role model for Boardies.[18] Such a context of producorial affirmation signals the manner in which affirmation becomes a mutual practice between Smith and Boardies.

The duality of this mutual practice therefore reveals how the Board culture operates in cyclical modes of audience→producer, producer→audience ratification. In Boardies' affirmation of Smith, they perpetuate Smith's mediated persona of the understanding and friendly producer. In turn, Smith's affirmation of the Boardies recognises and ratifies their fan activity, reinforcing his role as locus of the culture, and giving Boardies further cause to constructing his friendly producorial persona. This latter process of affirmation undermines the perception of a personal dynamic between Smith and Boardies, demonstrating that although such friendships may exist, they are initiated and performed (and possibly tainted as a result) within Smith's producorial

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[18] Although TheManWhoLikesSMod notes that Smith 'told me, with a chuckle, he was possibly [the] worst candidate to model a life after,' (Survey response 14/5/2010), Smith's role model status has been further hinted at with the 2012 publication of the autobiographical *Tough Sh*t: Life Advice From a Fat, Lazy Slob Who Did Good*, a "self-help" book that promoted Smith's ability to 'help you live your days in as Gretzky a fashion as you can – going where the puck is *gonna* be' (Inside jacket), aping his adopted mantra from ice hockey player (and Smith's idol) Wayne Gretzky.

rhetoric. The cyclical process is maintained because of Smith's hierarchal position as the fan object – only in this position of power can Boardies' fan activities be ratified in a way considered significantly meaningful to them (Figure 10).
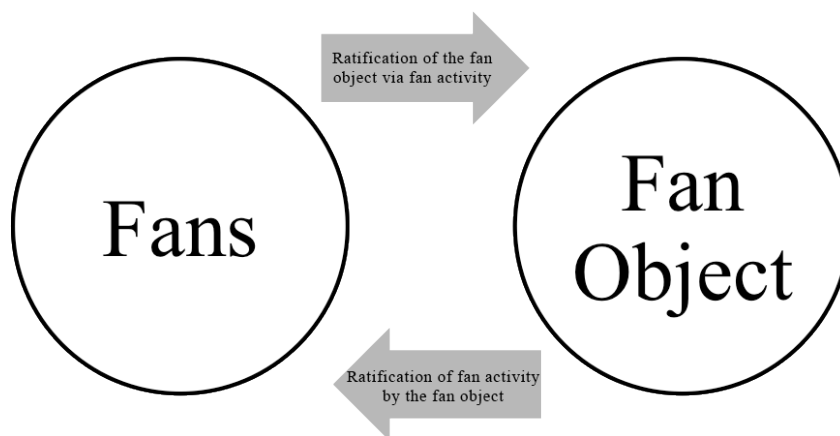
Figure 10: Mutual affirmation between Boardies as Fans and Smith as the Fan Object.

Such processes between fan object and fans reflect ways in which fans have previously been explicitly addressed by their objects, particularly in the case of television fandom where "metacult" episodes specifically function as 'TV about cult TV audiences' (Hills 2010: 216). There is initially a distinction to be made here between address at an extra-textual level and on a textual level, where Hills' "metacult" definition applies. Extra-textually fans' influence and activity can be affirmed and ratified, such as *Community* creator Dan Harmon's acknowledgement and embrace of fan activity, where he acknowledges that 'our fans influence the show':

> In my mind, the show definitely caters to a mind that enjoys scouring something over, picking up details and obsessing over it. It never suggests to you that you would be stupid for wasting your time on it …

> I observe [fan productivity] and the way people are consuming
> [*Community*], because I'm a nerd too and I love to obsess about my
> favourite TV shows. (Jeffery 2011)

Yet Harmon's acknowledgement of *Community* fandom is a different

phenomenon to *Community* acknowledging *Community* fandom; Harmon is an

associate of the fan object rather than the fan object itself. Where the fan object

addresses fandom – via metacult episodes in the case of television series –

there appears to be a more direct impact on fan relationships to the object. For

instance, Sharon Marie Ross notes how *Xena* episode "A Day in the Life":

> …obliquely paints a picture of both female and male fans of the star …
> Online fans thrilled to the attention producers appeared to be paying to
> academic and popular critiques that had been circulating about Xena's
> clothing – and thrilled even more attention producers appeared to be
> paying to fans' online discussions of the lesbian tension building
> between Xena and Gabrielle. (2008: 39)

As a result of producorial affirmation, *Xena* fans' affection for their fan object

increased. Yet although it could be tempting to similarly categorise *Xena*'s and

Smith's intent as a form of "genuine", "real life" interaction, designed to

improve relations between stakeholders, Derek Johnson's observation of the

antagonistic relationship between *Buffy* producers and fans suggests more

cynical motivations may come into play. Johnson notes that in response to

fans' feelings of being "fan-tagonised" by producers 'the television text itself

[was] mobilized to narratively construct "acceptable" fan activity' (2007: 294-

5). So while character Andrew's transformation 'from sexually ambiguous

nerd into confirmed heterosexual, suave sage, and trusted ally' may seem a

tactic that ratifies the audience's obsessive behaviour, fandom is in actuality

replaced 'with a new social discipline … [and Andrew's] redemption thus

promises a more proper, passive, socially acceptable fan consumption.'

(Johnson 2007: 297-8)

Although there can be an acknowledgement of fan activity, affirmation and acknowledgement of fans by the fan object is performed under a rhetoric of producorial control.[19] The decision to have the *Buffy* narrative promote a blueprint for acceptable fan behaviour signals the transformative potential fan objects have. Kevin Smith's affirmation of his fan community then, although outwardly lauded (by both himself and his fans) as being particularly significant or special, operates according to traditional and familiar notions of fan object-fan relations, where the acknowledgement of fan cultures promotes a cyclical pattern of affirmation, perpetuating the hierarchal importance of the fan object – in this case Kevin Smith.

As a result, and as Alan McKee suggests, the use of binaries to understand structures is deceptively simple (2004: 167-85). As such, the context of mutual affirmation demonstrates that "Boardie" identity is constructed on a relatively close relationship with Kevin Smith, that is nonetheless predicated on a foundation of fandom.

Yet this is not to ignore the testimony of fans and Smith who do claim a close relationship. Rather, I suggest that regardless of conscious "pure" intent, the process of mutual affirmation is beneficial to Kevin Smith and the maintenance of his fan culture. Compensating for both sides of interpretation, the process of mutual affirmation establishes a malleable context whereby

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[19] This producorial control does not always seek to "ratify" fan practices, and at times can take the form of explicit condemnation in the depiction of fannish activity in a perjorative manner. For example, according to Matt Hills, in the updated *Doctor Who* series 'fandom was not just being killed off by the monsters … it had diegetically *become* the monster' (2010: 216).

Smith moves between roles of friend and producer, and the Boardies move between roles of friend and fan. The extent to which Smith influences conceptualisation of Boardie culture is therefore a subjective issue. However, this demonstrates that although specificities of such influence are not uniformly and broadly applicable, the influence is nonetheless identifiable – Boardie culture has been distinctly informed by Smith's own practices.

To summarise, this chapter has demonstrated the ways in which the relationship between Smith and Boardies is not easily classified in binary or oppositional terms. Whilst it is clearly an important factor to consider in terms of Board operation, it is a complex relationship that signals the way in which producers may take as much gratification from communal spaces as fans. Using other producer-fan relationships for comparison, Smith and the Boardies claim their relationship is particularly close, worthy of note. Although definitively proving "closeness" is an impossible task, what is possible to learn from such contextualisation is that other aspects of the Smith-Boardie relationship can be held to similar scrutiny. With this in mind, Chapter Four provides a counterpoint to Smith-Boardie friendships, demonstrating the malleable context of affirmation in practice. However, in order to fully understand the intricacies of Smith-Boardie relations it is first necessary to explore other functioning experiential contexts of operation.

Chapter Two

History as Semiotic Resource

The previous chapter performed an initial demonstration of how Boardie identity functions in relation to the presence of Kevin Smith. Yet such a demonstration does not identify Boardie productivity according to Fiske's triumvirate model, instead merely showing how a sense of fan identity can be constructed by both the fans and their object of fandom. What this chapter will provide, then, is an initial examination of how such fan identities function practically on the Board: what these fans actually do, or specifically, *do not* do, whether or not Smith is present. This chapter will consider the manner in which Boardies' practices act as a cumulative learning process for behaviour considered "appropriate" for Boardie identity, through the process of semiotic practice described by Fiske thusly:

> Semiotic productivity is characteristic of popular culture as a whole rather than of fan culture specifically. It consists of the making of meanings of social identity and of social experience from the semiotic resources of the cultural commodity. (1992: 37)

Using this definition, here I consider the nature of the primary cultural commodity of the Board, examining what resources Boardies use to construct their social experience. As Crawford notes, 'meanings are learned, and understanding is an active and social process of interpretation and reinterpretation,' (2012: 137) and such a consideration of the Board's semiotic processes will detail the practices of the community.

"Historical" Cultural Capital

In his 1986 essay 'The forms of capital', Pierre Bourdieu theorised the manner

in which capital can manifest, highlighting what he believed to be three

fundamental forms:

> … as *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible
> into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights;
> as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into
> economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of
> educational qualifications; and as *social capital*, made up of social
> obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions,
> into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of a title
> of nobility. (1986: 47, emphasis in original)

Whilst Bourdieu's work has been appropriated in a number of sociological

contexts (Bennett et al. 2009; Friedman 2011), it has been usefully attributed to

the study of fan cultures, and it is such theorisation I engage in order to

understand the criteria used by Boardies to assign meaning to their

interpretation of Board experience.

Initially applicability can be extrapolated from Bourdieu's work

directly. Whilst Bourdieu's categorisation of economic, cultural, and social

capital considers access to money, educational qualifications, and class

connections, one might consider these terms as applied to the amount of money

one can spend, the amount of knowledge one has, and the number of friends

one has in regards to a particular fan culture. Matt Hills has usefully posited

that in addition to John Fiske's (1992) coinage of "fan cultural capital", which

constitutes the knowledge that a fan has about their object of fandom, it is also

productive to consider aspects of "fan social capital" – the network of fan

friends and acquaintances that a fan possesses, as well as their access to media

producers and professional personnel linked with the object of fandom (2002: 57). It is with these definitions that I frame Boardies' responses, to understand how their sense of capital 'functions as a sort of social orientation, a "sense of one's place"' (Bourdieu 1984: 466) in relation to their fandom of Smith and social experience on the Board.

My own conceptualisation of practices directly influenced the line of enquiry with which I approached Boardies to share their own notions of Board practice, and as such plays a key role in my acafan identity. As mentioned in the Introduction, my status of Board lurker was preceded by a brief instance of posting activity in 2003, and my conception of the Board prior to the commencement of this PhD research is inflected by three major components. Firstly, I take into consideration my experiences in using the Board in 2003, where I looked to an official FAQ thread which purported to guide users on Board etiquette. Following this, I discuss my own posting history on the Board, prior to my seven years of lurking, before finally discussing my more self-aware forays into an academic-fan identity via my 2009 research, which provided a more direct consideration of Smith's fan affirmation.

In detailing my own experiential contexts up until the commencement of this PhD research, I reveal an important aspect of my research process. Such a method charts my own temporal understanding of the Board and my (aca)fan identity, as my conception established over ten years of fandom has both influenced – and is influenced by – this study. The shifting nature of my approaches to the Board, as well as those of the participants of this research, demonstrates how changes in one's capital (in fannish and non-fannish classifications) can alter environmental perception (Fiske 1992: 33).

As a result of Smith's propensity for proclaiming the close relationship he shared with fans, I "discovered" the Board in 2003. I had the impression that users generally seemed familiar with one another, and that there was a shared understanding of what kinds of talk (similar to frick.'s above understanding) would incite discussion and debate; as Tarhook notes, 'You can't be involved in the board too long without realizing the past many of these people have together. They truly "know each other".' (Survey response, 17/05/10). How this understanding of Board operation was regulated or mediated was not immediately apparent from posts themselves, yet the "ViewAskew WWW Board Summaries" FAQ webpage attempted to provide some guidance for new users.[20]

For example, one entry noted that users other than Smith himself might answer questions posted to the forum as 'One of the unwritten policies on the board is that people who know the answer to a question answer it.' Another entry stated that users new to the Board could expect to be derided more than others as 'they tend to be the ones who don't know the dynamics of the board, don't take the time to see how the board works and then complain the most when people flame them.' What is notable about these FAQ entries is that although they posit guidance, they only actually allude to directives for operation. Referring to "unwritten policies" or Board "dynamics", the entries reveal that there *are* structural underpinnings to Board activity, but are unable to state the actual specifics.

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[20] The WWW Board Summaries page has been taken offline, but a web cache is available to view at:
http://web.archive.org/web/20090625041432/http://newsaskew.com/summaries/wwwboard.sht ml

More so, they are unable to state how one should actively learn these attributes of Board operation, instead advising users to 'read through summaries, read older boards, and/or sit and watch for a little while before posting' (Ibid.) In omitting direct guidance, the FAQs reaffirm the implicit nature of what constitutes acceptable Board behaviour: one cannot be taught how to act appropriately, but can only learn through individual study and experience. This learning process therefore suggests that knowledge of Board history is useful in inflecting Boardie practice, where users must look to the Board's past in order to inform future appropriate activity.

My 2003 posting activity was similarly inflected by my own (albeit brief) past experiences. In addition to my embarrassing first post and unstimulating second, my subsequent six posts (before I resumed lurker status until 2010) reveal how I conceived of appropriate posting behaviour at the time. In these early posts I initiated or responded to discussions regarding View Askew-produced film *A Better Place* (1997) (directing a question to director Vincent Pereira) (05/03/03); British comedy gameshow *Shooting Stars* (13/03/03); the travails of Norwich City Football Club (09/03/03; 18/03/03; 22/03/03); and questioning the relevance of various Academy Award categories (22/03/03). Notably, these discussions are largely unrelated to View Askew and – with the exception of a single verbal allusion to *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (09/03/03)[21] – references to Kevin Smith and his work are completely absent.

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[21] Declaring my affection for Norwich in a similar manner to Jay and Silent Bob's affection for New Jersey (Tom84, Board post, 09/03/03).

Related to the fact that my acafan approach to Board fan practice was socially unsuccessful, the nature of the topics with which I chose to engage suggests that I was perhaps uncomfortable participating in Smith-centric discussion at this early stage of my Board career. Possibly intimidated by an atmosphere I perceived to be dedicated to the cultivation of a fan culture, my initial posts avoid discussion of Smith so as to not explicitly demarcate myself as an outsider, where irruptions of "tired" discourse – covering ground familiar to longer-term Boardies – may highlight my relatively poor fan capital. My early Board posts seem to avoid engaging with aspects of fan cultural capital in order to circumvent immediate engagement with fan hierarchies and the potential that my contributions would result in an absence of intra-fan affirmation.

Regardless of my potential motivations, however, is the fact that the space even made allowances for such "off-topic" conversations to take place. Where other fan spaces would debate the suitability of non-fannish discourse (Gatson and Zweerink 2004: 28), it appeared that on the Board Smith-centred talk was not necessary in order to participate: funployee109, for example, notes that 'Some of my favorite threads have nothing to do with VA films and I thinks that's a really cool thing.' (Survey response, 12/05/10). So my initial Board experience is marked as one of trying to integrate myself into a social network, rather than any particular fan culture. Kevin Smith fandom was the binding force of the Board, yet it was a sphere in which wider cultural discussion could take place, echoing Tuszynski's observation that audience groups can be significant examples of social activity being organized around cultural commodities (2008: 83).

However, what is notable is how the Board's social activity began to dissolve the dominance of Kevin Smith fandom as the main cultural commodity. Explicitly mentioned on the FAQ page, repeated semiotic analysis of Smith's work is actively discouraged:

> Often times you will find that your question has been answered somewhere else before. People who come in here and ask questions that are in the summaries, or questions that could be found very easily on the web site, often get scolded by people who frequent the boards

Most obviously, there is a (warning of a) detrimental attitude on display for users who have shown unwillingness to research oft-repeated discussion topics before posting, demonstrating disrespect to the codes and conventions of Board behaviour. However, more tellingly this FAQ entry points to elements that suggest displays of limited fan cultural capital will be castigated. The "summaries" referred to here are subsections of the FAQ page which refer specifically to different aspects of Smith and View Askew's output. For example, the *Chasing Amy* section features entries posing questions such as 'Do Holden and Alyssa get back together after the movie?', 'Was any footage cut for the home video release?', 'Is Banky gay?', and 'How did you come to cast Ben Affleck and Joey Lauren Adams as Holden and Alyssa?' Providing such trivia for individual productions, these summaries pool together frequently asked questions in a bid to avoid repeat discussions on the Board. Awareness of the answers to these questions would maintain/add to one's fan cultural capital, which works 'to produce social privilege and distinction' (Fiske 1992: 31). In framing these summaries as being historical records of prior fannish Board discussions, the FAQs demonstrate that Boardies have, at

some point, engaged in semiotic practice using Smith's work as the community's primary cultural commodity.

Using the Board to associate Smith's cultural production to particular meanings and responses through discussion threads (Crawford 2012: 138), the Boardies are able to wield their subsequently accumulated fan cultural knowledge to 'enhance [their] power over, and participation in, the original, industrial text,' (Fiske 1992: 43). As llth92 notes, 'ALL of Smith's fandom is an inside joke, you can pick out other fans with one line expertly placed, because upon the quote being delivered, the other fans smile, look up, or nod, or complete the dialogue, while others look on lost.' (Survey response, 23/05/10) Much in the manner that *Star Wars* fans appropriate their own performance in participation in the text (Brooker 2002: 29-62), llth92 demonstrates the way in which 'textual knowledge is used for discrimination in the dominant habitus but for participation in the popular' (Fiske 1992: 43) – the extent of one's Kevin Smith knowledge thusly performs either an inclusive or exclusive function depending on the context in which it is implemented.

Yet the FAQ's specific classification of this knowledge-making discussion as having occurred *in the past* signals the way in which the Board's longevity affects its operation. Here the Boardies present their community as an "off-topic" space because the "on-topic" discussions (those about Kevin Smith and his output) have largely already happened. Whilst this is not to say that "on-topic" discussion never occurs – the types of direct interaction with Smith ensure that is not the case – present Board activity, and the nature of the articulation of Kevin Smith fandom is inflected by the knowledge that such articulations, and thus the attainable cultural capital from those articulations,

have previously occurred. Such a process means that domineering displays of cultural capital tend not to transpire, with fenderboy claiming 'I've yet to see people who claim to be "the biggest fan" which really is a breath of fresh air.' (Survey response, 12/05/10) As a result, the representation of fan cultural capital deviates from its traditional function as 'a way for young fans to challenge their elders and betters.' (Hills 2002: 55)

As Crawford notes, 'the meanings we attach to objects and how we react to them, are not natural or innate, but rather learned patterns' (2012: 138). In the case of the Board, the patterns for Kevin Smith fan consumption have been pre-established via the community's longevity, meaning that subsequent semiotic productivity is concerned less with the cultural object of fandom, than with aspects of processing and decoding the dynamic, fluid social interaction of the Board. In terms of productivity, semiotic Board practice can be conceptualised as historical, whereby "off-topic" social discussion becomes the primary mode of interaction, but is inflected with a shared conception of cultural capital surrounding the original fan object. In this context, "history" can be understood as a semiotic resource, where the Board itself – rather than Kevin Smith – becomes the primary cultural commodity of the community.

Academic Influence, Acafan Entrée, and Fan Response

My understanding of the Board as a primarily social outlet therefore marked my understanding of its function when I first came to perform academic analysis of the space as part of my MA thesis in 2009. My dissertation 'Controlling the "Train Wreck": Kevin Smith and the Reception Management

of *Clerks II*' adopted a lurking methodology of qualitative web analysis, the results of which added to my preconceived conception of Board operation. Using my previous experience of the Board's historical context, the *Clerks II* reception project was drawn to moments where functionality based on prior Board experience was explicitly detailed by Boardies themselves via forum posts. In addition, the project examined moments when Smith overtly detailed how he felt knowledge of historical Board moments was an appealing trait in Boardies, demonstrating his proclivity for affirmation of his fans. For instance, in choosing attendees for a *Clerks II* preview screening, Smith noted 'I'm gonna be hand-picking the fifty [attendees] myself. Attendance is gonna be based on how long you've been posting, what kind of postings you make, and ultimately, how trustworthy I think you are.' (Smith, Board post, 08/12/05) Here Smith is keenly reliant to include those who have participated most satisfactorily within the localised economy of the Board. Loyalty and longevity are valued, but in seeking Boardies who make particular *kinds* of posts, Smith demonstrates that the users who generate and circulate material deemed most appropriate for Boardie culture are rewarded.[22]

But in noticing this, and including it as an example in my MA work, I too began to place faith and capital in the length of membership and number of posts as a hierarchal indicator, as well as an understanding that only those Boardies who had such longevity and post counts could comprehend what "kind" of posts would contribute to Boardie culture. As a fan of Smith – and without the contextualising sociality of other Boardies – my trust in his opinion

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[22] Rewarding users' "trustworthiness" is a further example of the context of mutual affirmation in action.

of what constitutes preferred fan behaviour became the dominant shaping context for my own Board experience – if Smith felt that awareness and contribution of history as semiotic resource was important, than so too would I.[23] As a consequence of this, my MA thesis highlighted Boardies' forum posts that similarly spoke to themes of longevity, loyalty, and participation, that supported Smith's hierarchal conception of the Board.

From first "discovering" the Board in 2003, reading the FAQ threads and tentatively posting, to lurking through to 2010 (and writing an MA thesis on the way), my understanding of the Board as a social space, built on an historical context that valued knowledge of Board cultural practice, contextualised my acafan position. Such a context meant that my preconceived conception of Board practice influenced my PhD research strategy and early considerations of fan behaviour. As a result, my idea of Board "history" not only guided my survey questions, but also my entrée into the fan community.

Detailed in the Introduction, my entrée was guided by Robert Kozinets' recommendation of 'act[ing] like a new member, while also clearly stating … [you] are undertaking a research project' (2010: 93). My opening statement to the Board in 2010 thusly attempted to introduce my research aims, as well as my own position as a Kevin Smith fan, and in presenting myself I attempted to display my knowledge of Boardie culture:

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[23] I classified longevity and post counts according to the playful ranking system used. The majority of these ranks are View Askew film references, varying from the lowly "Jizz Mopper" – the undesirable occupation discussed in *Clerks* for under 1000 posts; "Metatron" – a title named after the angelic voice of God from *Dogma* for over 10,000 posts; and the highest rank for over 30,000 posts, "Sad sad fuck logging too may 'net hours". In addition, some Boardies had the exclusive tagline 'OG-VA' [Original View-Askewer], denoting an exclusive label that was only attainable through length of posting history (i.e., from the Board's original 1997 inception) regardless of post count.

Hi all,

Just looking to introduce myself to the Board! My name is Tom, 25, from Norwich, UK, and as you can probably see I actually joined up a long time ago (when registration was still free!), but now feel the time is right to join in rather than just lurking. (Saying that though, I did actually post a handful of times back on the old board in 03).

I've been a fan of Kevin since around 2002 – a Mallrats VHS was my first foray into the world of VA, and I've not looked back since. Following that, I've visited the Stash and Quick Stop in NJ, been to three Q&As in London (Criterion Theatre DVD shoot, 2nd Prince Charles, and 1st Indigo2), and spent far too much on Kevin Smith DVDs and merchandise!

I would count myself quite fortunate, I'm lucky enough to be doing in life exactly what I want – I'm currently studying for my PhD in Film at the UEA here in Norwich – which allows me to combine a passion for study with a passion for film. In fact, my love of all things Kevin Smith has also managed to crossover – my MA dissertation focused on Kevin and the way he managed the reception of Clerks II (my personal favourite VA film), and my PhD thesis is also going to be focused on Kevin and the VA community.

I look forward to getting to know you all properly, and hopefully I can encourage some more long-dormant lurkers to make themselves known! (Board post, 13/01/10)

My acafan entrée into the community uses a demonstration of my fan cultural capital as a hierarchal marker, attempting to appeal to aspects of longevity and (consumer) loyalty that Smith may find worthy of affirmation. Because of my lack of interaction with Board culture, I highlight a personal account of my fandom in relation to fan attributes I believe may be desirable. Taking into account Fiske's belief that 'In fandom … the accumulation of knowledge is fundamental to the accumulation of cultural capital,' (1992: 42) in this post I articulate my fandom in my own historical terms: I'm not just a fan of Kevin Smith's work who is now using the Board – I have been a Kevin Smith fan for a number of years and have spent large amounts of money indulging my fandom. I'm not here to ask questions about Kevin – if anything, my longevity

as a fan qualifies me to be "one of the people who will answer a question if they know it." As a fan in 2010 – rather than 2003 – I was more confident that my fan capital would be received in a positive manner that would facilitate my integration into the Board culture, as a further seven years of consumption had supported my fan profile.[24]

What is particularly notable is how my entrée was received by Boardies, and how their responses reaffirm my efforts to conform to a stylistic choice consistent with Board cultural norms. All in a playful manner, one Boardie referred to the fact that in having "watched" for a number of years I must be aware of a number of secrets. Another asked me not to divulge something they "may have said" about another Boardie. One person claimed "ominously" that I must "know too much".

Picking up on the explicit reference to my fan longevity, Boardies, perhaps unsurprisingly, expressed astonishment to the length that I lurked. However, most striking is the fact that with only one post as evidence, the Boardies readily equate my longevity with knowledge. Regardless of my actual cumulative awareness of Board culture, the responses here demonstrate that there is apparently *something* to know; and that "something" appears to be a valued commodity. In making reference to me knowing "secrets" of the Board, and demonstrating (albeit humorously) that knowledge of such secrets has potential to be damaging – it is clear that potentially revealing aspects of "private" Boardie culture to those without sufficiently (and "properly") attained capital seemingly constitutes a taboo move. Through their responses,

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[24] I think also the confidence that taking an academic (i.e. "professional") stance towards Smith must be taken into account.

the Boardies demonstrate that a cumulative understanding of how their culture

operates is apparently implicit in posting behaviour.

"History", **Subjectivity, and Cumulative Knowledge**

My survey questions subsequently reflected the accumulation of my

conception of Board history as a semiotic resource. The question 'When

posting are you aware of the history of the Board?' was posed with the belief

that the responses would mirror the experiential context that had shaped my

own participation. However, Duff's response revealed that the notion of what

constituted "history" was not shared by all:

> "History"? Not sure what you mean. If it's the fact that there were
> white boards before the phpBB iteration, yes. Every once in awhile, if
> someone links to it, I'll flip through the pages. If you mean the drama
> that comes up apparently every other week, yes and no. Yes to stuff that
> occurs during days that I'm posting. No to the stuff that happened
> before I joined and during my "off/lurking days", unless someone
> mentions it later in another thread. (Survey response, 13/05/10)

Here Duff's conception of "history" initially seems to constitute a definition

concerning fan space. Firstly, he refers to the notion of the virtual space of the

Board, and the fact that aesthetically and technologically the Board has

changed since its inception, from the White Board of 1995-2004, to the Board

v.2, and finally to a vBulletin-based forum ("Board v.3") in July 2010. By

referring to the separate stages of the Board's software, Duff places an

emphasis on a chronological and technological definition of history.

Yet although this may seem a simplistic and reductive approach to

categorising Kevin Smith fandom and Board culture, Duff's latter comment,

that 'if someone links to [the White Board], I'll flip through the pages,' demonstrates that actually "history" is less concerned with fan space than the interaction within those spaces – the kinds of active and social process of interpretation and reinterpretation that occur in communities over time (Crawford 2012: 142), indicating its value as a semiotic resource. By being specifically directed to the white board, Duff reveals that prior interaction is still referenced years later by fans, and that, much like my own understanding of what constitutes Board "history", knowledge of such communication can help inflect current posting behaviour and maintain the accepted nature of Board culture. Looking at Duff's final comments, it might be construed that "history" is particularly concerned with moments of "drama" – here meaning conflict between (any number of) Boardies. However, in opposition to Duff I believe that these moments of "drama" do not necessarily have to be categorised as clashes between personalities, and in fact "drama" can be said to behold aspects by exemplifying "everyday" moments on the Board.

What is interesting about Duff's invocation of the concept in relation to history, however, is the way in which the 2010 Board logo (Figure 11) explicitly references the term. With the letters composed of images from Smith's filmic output (and personal life, with the inclusion of a portrait of him and Schwalbach) the makeup of the Board quite explicitly contains reference to past aspects of View Askew culture, further enforcing the Board's historical context. As part of a detail featuring former View Askew mascot Vulgar the clown, a slogan reads 'The View Askew Board: 15 Years of Off-Screen Drama' (Figure 12).

Figure 11: The View Askew Board logo, with visual references to Smith's filmic output from *Clerks* to *Zack and Miri Make a Porno*.

Figure 12: Explicit celebration of Board history and "drama".

Arguably, the reference to "drama" in the Board logo does not have the negative connotations that Duff implies. Instead, the word can be seen as a play on the difference between the filmic and non-filmic worlds of Kevin Smith. If the term as used here were to refer to Duff's definition its presence on the first page of the Board website would be puzzling: reference to apparent "negativity" would likely be unappealing to new users. In addition, the

presentation of the words on a condom wrapper playfully acknowledges the desire to keep awareness of "private" moments safely contained to those with a working knowledge of Boardie culture.[25]

Therefore, despite the fact that conflict can and does exist on the Board, historically interaction is not defined by it. Negative irruptions occur, though as Baym summarises 'flaming … is perceived as more common than it actually is. … We may overestimate the amount of flaming because single messages may be seen by so many people and because hostile messages are so memorable' (Lea et al., 1992, cited in 2010: 58-9) Applying this observation to the Board, it is understandable that Duff would categorise his (negative interpretation of) "drama" as being integral to Board history, yet doing so seems to imply that conflict is the rule rather than the exception. Instead, I believe the reverse to be true: as Baym notes, 'rather than occurring in the absence of social norms, people often flame in ways that demonstrate their awareness that they are violating norms.' (Ibid.)

Trying to discern Boardie awareness of apparent social "norms" through the question 'When posting, are you aware of the history of the Board?' can therefore be understood as appealing to the subjective nature of the term. Instead of trying to gauge fan response to particular "notable events", research participants are able to address the question according to their own cumulative understanding of the operation of Board culture. Babydoll

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[25] In addition, the condom wrapper suggests that, in contrast to fan cultures which attempt to claim their "worthiness" of mainstream attention (Ross 2008: 48), the Board may be actively trying to keep the mainstream *out*.

addresses such a point whilst discussing her own early forays into the online

culture:

> I did feel obligated to educate myself on how the board operated. From the start it was very clear that this was a community of people who had "known" each other for quite awhile. Every community has unwritten rules that determine what is and isn't appropriate and what is and isn't accepted within the community. By lurking and taking the time to assess the environment, when I finally began to post I was able to avoid doing anything outside the tacit guidelines. This knowledge definitely affects how I post. (Email interview, 08/07/10)

Babydoll's response here is telling in what it reveals about the way cumulative

awareness informs approaches to semiotic practice. Babydoll conceives of

members of the Board as a community that are familiarly acquainted with one

another, a 'nostalgic fantasy' of idealism (Tuszynski 2008: 47). However, it is

her reference to the 'unwritten rules' of online communities – evoking the

2003 FAQ posts – that is notable in the context of accumulating knowledge. In

opposition to the explicit rules of the Bronze, for example, which includes

directives ranging from the widely applicable to the more community-

specific,[26] conduct on the Board constitutes an unstated agreement between

Boardies, with adherence directed by cumulative awareness of the Board as

cultural commodity.

By noting that she felt 'obligated' to educate herself on Board culture,

babydoll makes it clear that cultivating an experiential context of history is an

expected practice. Similarly, noting that she achieved her own context of

awareness through lurking and 'assessing the environment', babydoll signifies

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[26] Widely applicable rules include 'The following conduct is not permitted: flaming, swearing, cursing, and other generally abusive behavior', whereas more community-specific state 'Users are not allow to utilize colors in their posts without express written permission of the web hosts' (Gatson and Zweerink 2004).

that posting on the Board is a measured custom; feeling comfortable enough to post takes time – those that do not can be considered impatient, such as Hannah who 'was nervous to jump in but eventually … just said "fuck it" and started posting' (Survey response, 12/05/10). To ensure the Board remains a "happy" place, Boardies should therefore strive to 'articulate [themselves] more clearly, engage with others more often and more directly and with more enthusiasm' (Roguewriter, email interview, 13/07/10).

It is notable that babydoll's description of "assessing the environment" is similarly as vague as the FAQ's recommendation to "sit and watch" – again there is no suggestion as to what the user should actually be doing at this point. Regardless of the actual activity in hand, the decidedly passive nature of the (in)action reflects concerns over fans "overstepping the mark". Similar to my own 2003 experience of wanting to become accepted into the social, rather than fannish makeup of the Board, babydoll's initial tentative steps into the culture represent intent to abide by the established structure, reflecting Maggie's observation that she tries to be 'respectful' of the history of the Board (Survey response, 12/05/10).

These approaches to posting signal that those who can expect to most successfully integrate themselves into the Board social network – in terms of capital gained and knowledge of Board culture – will have done so because their cumulative experience has taught them the appropriate manner in which to act. Part of the operation of the Board community then, is reliant on participants who are similarly aware of the learning-knowledge context in which they function. The Board thusly works according to an ongoing practice

of historical semiotic practice that inflects a shared conception of "acceptability".

It is possible to see this educational experience detailed in Boardie's survey responses. For example, slithybill mentions one of his early Board posts, where he asked 'a serious question in a sarcastic way and got a very blunt reply … it was hard to convey the spirit of my sarcasm and translate it to text on the Board.' (Survey response, 12/05/10) Such practice became a learning experience for slithybill, who then notes 'now that I'm feeling more comfortable … I am becoming more frivolous and less discriminating (or self-editing) with some of my posts,' (Ibid) making it clear that although the Board's social norms are not immediately apparent, they are able to be constructed through processes of cognition and social interaction (Crawford 2012: 137). A contextual knowledge of "history" thereby becomes one of the key tools with which to impart directives for the immediate social relationships it supports.

Slithybill's response demonstrates that through the process of posting, cumulative knowledge of appropriate Board behaviour contributes to later interactions. By being more "comfortable" on the Board, slithybill is able to forgo the editing process that he maintained before; his posts now marked by a distinct cumulative awareness. Talos notes how his awareness of such knowledge was similarly shaped over a number of months:

> At first I was careful how I posted as my humor can be quite sarcastic and appear offensive to people. After a few months of taking part in conversations and getting to know others as they got to know me, I was able to loosen up a little and know when my posts would be received as humorous, or when to curb my humor or watch the "tone" of my post so I didn't offend (Email interview, 10/07/10)

Again, here it is clear that the learning process of "acceptable" Board

behaviour occurs via the application of history as a semiotic resource to one's

own posting habits. Similar to Margaret McLaughlin et al's study of standards

of conduct on Usenet, there is a sense then that 'admonishing offenders who

stray from the specific … norms is clearly an attempt to preserve the integrity

of that community's raison d'être.' (1995: 106) Although on the Board

correction may not necessarily take the form of admonishment, the

preservation of Board cultural values is seemingly prioritised. Such practices

evoke the context of mutual affirmation, where "good" fan behaviour –

"playing by the rules" – is rewarded, in this case by helping to forge successful

intra-fan relationships.

The personal application of cumulative knowledge to posting means

that Boardies could be described as "autodidactics" (Bourdieu 1984),

'individuals who are self-taught in an effort to raise their status in official

culture by compensating for their lack of cultural capital and the economic

capital that often comes with it.' (Brown 1997: 23) Talos comments further on

this self-teaching method by reflecting on topics labelled "suitable" for

discussion on the Board, noting that 'There are threads on the Board that I

respond [to] in ways that I would not on other [online forums], only because it

would be inappropriate on other[s] … whereas on the Board, it is what is

expected/requested in the thread.' (Survey response, 12/05/10) The notion of

"expected behaviour" on the Board again seems to be part of an implicit

learning ritual – appropriateness is determined by trial and error. Citing Judith

Martin, Gatson and Zweerink note that 'Etiquette is in part a ritual and "Ritual

provides a reassuring sense of social belonging far more satisfying than behavior improvised under emotionally complicated circumstances." (Martin 1998: 295)' (2004: 143) As seen on the Board, the ritual of slithybill and Talos' "improvised" trial and error eventually paves way for an understanding of Board etiquette, allowing for a more rewarding fan experience.

Trial and error therefore comes about as a result of repeated use of the online space. Cumulative knowledge of behaviour, "types" of posts, and approaches to interpersonal relationships deemed "appropriate" for the Board is derived from the understanding that the community's primary cultural commodity can change over time. In her description of her own immersion into *Star Trek* fandom Camille Bacon-Smith notes that 'community members … seemed to agree that two years is a reasonable length of time to develop a working knowledge of the forms and social life of the community' (1992: 81). Although the specific length of time needed to form knowledge of Board mores is not detailed, what this chapter demonstrates is that immersion does take time. Although community members value types of capital, the accumulation of capital requires work, and the proper articulation of one's accumulation also warrants diligence. Successful integration into a community, then, is as much a personal process than a social, and the following chapter will examine the way in personal practices inflects one's own online social network.

Chapter Three

Regularity and Computer-Mediated-Communication

The use of history as a semiotic resource detailed how Board participation operated as a learning process – a valuable function that suggested "off-topic" social discussion provided the opportunity to integrate oneself into Boardie culture. By avoiding politically-charged discourses of fan cultural capital, a user could instead more readily approach the social network with confidence that they may be accepted. The previous chapter hinted at the way in which the sociality of the Board moved functionality away from Kevin Smith as the primary cultural commodity, and more towards the Board itself being the main source of appeal. Here I will expand on this notion, detailing how use of the Board is categorised by Boardies as part of online routine that reflects contemporary trends of computer-mediated-communication, allowing for a clear practice favouring enunciativity to be identified.

Fiske notes that in opposition to the 'essentially interior' semiotic productivity, enunciative productivity is a public form 'when the meanings made are spoken and are shared within a face-to-face or oral culture' (1992: 37). In the understanding of the Board as a primarily social, rather than fannish space, the enunciative productivity that occurs concerns the prevalent "off-topic" talk that helps to perpetuate the Board's history. As Fiske notes, enunciation is 'the use of a semiotic system … which is specific to its speaker and its social and temporal context,' (1992: 38) and the social and temporal context of the Board as a long-established "off-topic" space reveals how

enunciative productivity becomes a primary point of appeal for the "normality" it represents in contemporary CMC (Sandvoss 2012: 79, n.2), rather than for any particular fannish indulgence.

The Normalisation of CMC

Whilst attempting to identify the aspects of Smith's output she most prefers, Maggie notes that 'I've always enjoyed Kevin's films, but his *Evening With* series is what truly drove me into "rabid" fandom.' (Survey response 12/05/10) It is in the reconciliation of enunciativity with what constitutes "rabid" activity – and why fans have particularly been drawn to the View Askew Message Board to express such rabidity – that this chapter will explore. Building on the preceding detailing of Boardies' use of history as a semiotic resource, this chapter will examine how in contrast to notions of such "rabidity", Board activity is not so vociferously concerned with the articulation of Kevin Smith fandom. Rather, participation on the Board constitutes a normalised, everyday practice that is in keeping with wider contemporary CMC practices rather than specific to fan cultures.

The notion that CMC practices are becoming more normalised in certain cultures is not new. In 1995 Sherry Turkle notes that 'Today people are embracing the notion that computers may extend an individual's presence,' (1995: 20) and in the same year Nancy Baym observes that 'Not only can CMC participants have identities, they can have relationships with other participants.' (1995: 156) Such categorisations have progressed to the point where 'Now we could have hundreds, even thousands [of online friends and

contacts], a dazzling breadth of connection.' (Turkle 2011: xi) Yet despite this, fan cultures' use of CMC has frequently been depicted as a "remarkable" practice (Pullen 2000; Coppa 2006; Kirby-Diaz 2009), with Asim Ali, for example, beginning his acafan account of immersion into the Bronze with the admission that 'the idea that anyone would willingly sit at a computer in order to be part of a community seemed bizarre to me' (2009: 94).

Although the fact online enunciativity may be a curious practice to some, it is precisely the normalisation of such technological prowess that is reflected in accounts of why users chose to begin posting on the View Askew Message Board specifically. Daddy Marksman for example notes that his initial Board use was due in part to '[needing] a new [message board] to join, and I happened upon the Askew board looking at Kevin's website, and I jumped right in.' (Survey response, 12/05/10) Similarly, Whim notes 'I was at work … and really bored. I started just reading web boards and popped onto this one.' (Survey response, 12/05/10) These responses demonstrate that online interaction is a familiar and comfortable practice: it was not a tremendous leap to go from exploring an online space to having it become 'an online home,' (yzzie, survey response, 12/05/10) regardless of the extent of fannish motivations involved. Indeed, Daddy Marksman's observation that he "*needed*" a new online space to join signals the way in which Kevin Smith fandom was not even a concern, but a desire for social CMC was.

Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson note how fans move adeptly in and out of various online spaces 'as their inclination and technological limitations dictate' (2006: 16) and although Hawkboy notes that respective forums each have their own 'rules, dynamics, [and] cliques' (Survey response, 12/05/10),

Boardies' discussions of the Board in comparison to other web forums demonstrates their ease with CMC and issues of decoding functionality. When responding in the affirmative that there is a measurable difference between their practices on the Board and elsewhere, respondents refer plainly in terms of the manner of talk produced online in different spaces, rather than how their online communication differs from off-. Graham Cracker for instance notes that 'My actions [on] other boards are not as "real" as [I] would say they are on the Board. I guess it is due to the connection I feel with people in the community' (Survey response, 27/05/10). Such a comment signals the way in which Graham Cracker is aware of the processes required in effectively portraying the kind of "real life", "genuine" identity suggested earlier by Tarhook (Survey response, 17/05/10). His online proficiency allows him to gauge the mores of individual online cultures, adjusting his behaviour and responding to others as he sees fit.

Hills' reservations about fans' discursive justification for their practices (2002: 66) reflects Jenkins' belief that 'fans often draw strength and courage from their ability to identify themselves as members of a group of other fans who shared common interests and confronted common problems.' (1997: 507) In his use of such strong terminology, Jenkins suggests being part of a fan culture is an inherent struggle, meaning that, as previously noted, to speak as a fan is to be labelled subordinate (Ibid). Here Jenkins believes that the volume of fans allied within a community can make the actions of said community relatively less bizarre by association. However, in my interrogation of questions of collective, I refrain from labelling fan activity as eccentric. Because the Kevin Smith fans in my study do not defend themselves against

any particular cultural institutions it would be unfair to compare their culture to any.[27]

Yet if one were to follow Hills' directive that questioning fans directly can lead to "cutting into the flow" (2002: 66) of their fan experience, there is a risk that the default start point for studying a fan culture would be in such a context of subordination. Instead, by allowing fans to reflect upon their own experience the extent to which the culture can be contextualised as a defensive structure can be more fully understood. For example, Brooker uses his interviews with *Star Wars* fans to examine the way in which a defensive attitude attempts to inform adherence to relatively "normal" social conventions:

> There is an interesting conflict at the heart of Scott's account. As he presents himself to a stranger, he proudly, albeit lightheartedly, admits to being a junkie with an obsession that is "actually quite pathetic." On the other hand … he is quick to dodge the stereotypes of "hermit" and "computer nerd." Scott is happy to be a bit of a joke, but only on his own terms; he revels in the details of his childish passion, but stresses that he has a social life off the computer, a respectably cool job, and a girlfriend of four years. (2002: 3)

Although Brooker's work here confirms Jenkins' suspicions, his intervention allows his research participants the opportunity to define their fan culture as they see it, in relation to their own social contexts.[28] However, what is important to understand for this study is that the apparently "nerdish" behaviour of the Boardies is neither defended nor "admitted to" such is the

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[27] Such considerations of fan taste and opinion are similarly noted by Sandvoss, who identifies the use of notions of habitus in previous fan studies (2005: 34-5).

[28] It should be noted that Brooker adopts a defensive scholar-fan position, noting 'Several [research participants] were wary that I would portray them and other fans as comedy misfits with a ridiculous fixation on a kiddy film. I couldn't do that without ridiculing myself.' (2002: xiii)

case with Brooker's participant, demonstrating the manner in which online communication has now been accepted as an everyday practice. For example, Roguewriter observes how the Board fits into his social routine:

> I spend most of my evenings and weekends with my family; the board is my sanity refuge during the workday, for the most part. What I think it reflects is just how hard it is to make friends as an adult of middle age. I don't make friends at work; too much politics, too many backstabbings in the making. … The Internet is no less a potential meeting place, though, than any others. (Email interview, 13/07/10)

Although Roguewriter is similarly keen to highlight his non-Board sociality – preferring to spend his "free" time with family – his account demonstrates the differing attitude towards online interaction than Brooker's participant. Where Brooker claims that Scott 'confirm[s] his normalcy' in mentioning his job and girlfriend (2002: 3), Roguewriter's inclusion of such information is merely used to contextualise where and how he uses the Board in his daily routine, not to rationalise it. Here confirming his normalcy by highlighting the proven issue of the difficulty of making friends during middle-age (Hartup and Stevens 1999), Roguewriter demonstrates a shift in attitude towards online relationships. Whilst it may be easy to be cynical about online friendships because of their volitional nature (Barney 2004: 160; Baym 2010: 102), Roguewriter's comments signal that online relationship building is at times a preferable practice – able to avoid the politics of offline friendships, with no medium-specific stigma held (Whitty 2007: 95). Such a viewpoint speaks to the relative strength of digital ties, which as Baym notes, 'encourage frequent,

companionable contact. They are voluntary, mutually reciprocal, supportive of partners' needs, and they create long-term contact' (2010: 125).[29]

The contextualisation of the Board as a normalised, primarily non-fannish space, is founded in its conceptualisation as part of an online routine where connectivity is commonplace (Turkle 2006). For instance, conceiving of the Board as one of a number of online hubs or spaces, Backtoblack notes that 'the board is my base on the net, it has been my home page for a long time' (Survey response, 01/06/10). Although the term "home page" is familiar in describing the website one encounters when launching their Internet browser, the use of the term "base" has different connotations, suggesting that the Board is the central point from which Backtoblack's web use emanates – his primary online presence is housed there, and becomes the portal through which he filters his online identity. Noting that 'I look forward to interacting with [Boardies] thru the day,' (Ibid) Backtoblack's identification of the Board being his "base" demonstrates the way in which his daily web routine is inflected by his Boardie identity.

Social Enunciativity

Similar to the previous discussions of Board history as semiotic resource, the focus on sociality rather than Kevin Smith fandom in these responses signals

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[29] Indeed, many research participants emphasised the impact online communication has had on their lives: Talos (Survey response 12/5/2010), Tom_Servo (Survey response, 12/5/2010), Ruth (Survey response, 12/5/2010) Tears In Rain (Survey response, 13/5/2010), and Roguewriter (Email interview, 13/7/2010) all signalled that they have met their significant others online. Demonstrating that online practice is a familiar and comfortable practice, integrated and embraced as part of everyday life.

the way in which the enunciative "off-topic" community of the Board could appeal due to its on-going 'sense of shared space, rituals of shared practices, and exchange of social support' (Baym 2010: 86) outside of fannish culture. Such a turn is an interesting context with which to consider the nature of fan "rabidity". As Rebecca Williams notes:

> [D]efinition of fandom is problematic given the range of ways in which one can engage both fan objects and/or fan community; "for some fans … the communal context of their fandom … form[s] the true core of their fandom, while for others, their fandom is driven more by an idiosyncratic bond with their object of fandom" (Sandvoss, 2005: 10). We must account for fan/fan *and* fan/object relationships in order to adequately elucidate varying fan practices. (2011a: 268)

What this section has examined thus far is how fan/fan and fan/object relationships – through a primary lens of sociality – have been the driving force of Board culture. As a result, more traditional "interpretive" (Zubernis and Larsen 2012: 18) fan productivities such as fiction, video and art (Jenkins 1992; Cicioni 1998; Bley 2009; Russo and Coppa 2012), are overlooked by Boardies detailing their experiential contexts of practice. In order to consider the nature of "rabidity" in the context of the Board, then, it is necessary to consider specifically *Board* practice rather than measuring productivities against the more "tangible" and written-about creative fan works. Here we can use the Board practice of enunciativity to chart the classification of rabidity. For example, Fiske notes the way in which enunciative practice can be appealing for participants:

> [M]uch of the pleasure of fandom lies in the fan talk that it produces, and many fans report that their choice of their object of fandom was determined at least as much by the oral community they wished to join as by any of its inherent characteristics. (1992: 38)

While the previous chapter attempted to explain how the Board has been able to evolve by using the past to inform future practices, in examining the appeal of enunciativity we can begin to identify why the Board needed to evolve in the first place. Conceptualising the View Askew fan community in her own terms, Ruth notes:

> It's a group of fans that came together out of a common like of Kevin Smith as a person and his movies, podcasts, books, etc. I think it's developed a lot beyond just being fans of Kevin Smith and the Viewaskewniverse, it's a group of people that have developed the most basic of common interests into a friendship that often extends beyond just being Kevin Smith fans. (Email interview, 21/12/10)

Much in the way the previous chapter was able to detail how the inflection of Board history facilitated communal change, here we can see that such a change was welcomed and embraced as stimulus to extend one's social network. Ruth pointedly describes Smith fandom as 'the most basic of common interests' – if not inferring a low degree of cultural capital then certainly placing it below "friendship" on a hierarchal scale. Placing social capital above cultural capital here (Hills 2002), Ruth demonstrates how the "normalised" social enunciativity can be seen as a main source of appeal for Boardies; while affection for Smith was the instigative factor, it is not the passion which keeps Board use as part of Ruth's online routine.[30] Rather, as yzzie explains, 'My love of Kevin Smith movies brought me to the Board. My love of the people and community made it into an online home.' (Survey response, 12/05/10)

Furthermore, reflecting comparisons of an online community to a café or pub in which to chat (Rheingold 2000; Steinkuehler and Williams 2006),

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[30] Ruth's comments also hint at a hierarchal distinction between Kevin Smith fans and Boardies, to be further examined in Section Three.

Tom_Servo observes 'At this point, I'm not posting as a fan of Kevin's work anymore, but because I belong there. I'm a regular I guess. The VA board is my Cheers.' (Survey response, 14/05/10). Such an admission may initially be startling in the context of a fan analysis, yet placed within the experiential contexts of mutual affirmation, history as semiotic resource, and regularity and CMC, Tom_Servo's disclosure is wholly appropriate. For example, in specifying "Kevin's *work*", one can assume that Smith still holds appeal as the noteworthy participant of the culture; Tom_Servo's ability to confidently assert he "belongs" is a result of his cumulative understanding of communal culture having been a member since 2004 (Ibid); and in referencing television's *Cheers* he infers that the Board is a regular social haunt where, indeed, everyone will know his name and always be glad that he came. Such a distinction, where cultural capital is explicitly demarcated as subordinate to social capital, signals a shift in the way the relationship between fandom and sociality within communities can be conceived. For instance, in his discussion of fan social capital, Matt Hills notes how:

> One highly unlikely combination of … forms of capital would … be high fan social capital and relatively low fan cultural capital. It is difficult to imagine how this fan would move through fan circles without betraying their lack of knowledge, and hence their lack of prestige within the fandom. (2002: 57)

Yet what is clear from the responses of Ruth, yzzie, and Tom_Servo is that, although unlikely, such a combination of forms of capital can exist and function cohesively. Whilst perhaps not founded on such a state of capital disequilibrium, the experiential contexts of practice detailed in this section demonstrate that such a community can be identified within fan studies. In addition to the aspects of web routine already highlighted in the responses from

Roguewriter and Backtoblack, Boardies' prioritisation of social over cultural capital means that "rabidity" can be conceptualised as the process by which Kevin Smith fandom becomes secondary to communal sociality as a result of the Board being part of everyday online routine. Although paradoxical, in the wider experiential contexts of Board operation capital can be thought of as fluid and dynamic – created and maintained by members of the community as part of enunciative productivity (Crawford 2012: 138).

Social Network Sites: Public/Private

This notion of paradoxical social/fandom is complicated by the presence of social network sites (SNS), such as Facebook or Twitter, which can perform a similar social function to the Board. Already I've detailed how users integrate the Board into their everyday web routines, yet if the Board can be conceived of as a primarily social, rather than fan, space, to what extent do fans use other SNSs, and how – if at all – do their online identities shift?

John Suler notes that 'Compartmentalizing or dissociating one's various online identities … can be an efficient, focused way to manage the multiplicities of selfhood,' (2002: 456) yet in a reflection of my earlier discussion of how disembodied identities can begin to merge, Boardies' use of SNSs at first glance represents an intersection of online communication. For instance, Maggie notes:

> Now that Social Networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook are available, there is overlap of connections for boardies. Get burnt out on the board (it happens)? You're still in contact with some of your favorite people on Facebook, or you have their email, or you go on

vacation to see people you would never have met without the board.
(Survey response, 12/05/10)

Although here Maggie demonstrates that Boardie communication can overlap

with SNSs, in noting that one can get "burnt out" on the Board she signals that

there are some things that SNSs can offer users that the Board cannot; in this

case, filtering out Boardies with whom one doesn't necessarily get on. Unlike

the Board, which is freely available for wider, open participation, welcoming

someone into a (potentially more) private space such as Facebook is a

conscious decision – power is more readily ascribed to the individual rather

than the community. In singling out those whose "Friend Requests" are

accepted, denied, or sought after, a further filtering process takes place

whereby direct access is given to those within the community you would most

like to communicate with. This is a view supported by Roguewriter, who notes

the manner in which interaction can alter between online spaces:

> It's more personal in a one-on-one way, to some degree. Facebook is
> still public, but it's a bit easier to follow a conversation there than in,
> say, the Den Thread, where six topics will be under discussion at any
> given moment. It's not that it's easier to click with someone in that
> alternative setting… but it's perhaps less cluttered with other chatter. …
> I think it strengthens groups within the main community group – it
> enhances the relationships you treasure most among the VA
> community, so perhaps there's a danger that it reinforces cliques or
> exclusive small clubs within the whole. But overall, I think it enhances
> more than it segregates. It enriches great online friendships to be able to
> carry them away from the message board, elsewhere on the internet –
> and eventually out into the real world. It's an added bonus, and a great
> way to turn great conversations with interesting people into lifelong
> friendships. (Email interview, 22/12/10)

Roguewriter and Maggie's conception of off-Board SNS practice is in

opposition to Baym's, who notes that the vast majority of SNS friendship pairs

facilitate connection by simply having access to one another's updates, rather

than directly communicating (2010: 134-5). In comparison, Roguewriter conceives of direct SNS communication as not only abundant, but also beneficial in instilling a greater sense of community on the Board itself between those whose connectivity transcends network boundaries. In addition, Roguewriter notes that the times he turns to Facebook for conversations rather than the Board is a result of web aesthetics – trying to connect with an individual is difficult because of the fractured nature of some Board topic threads. This means that although interaction is compartmentalized and selective across online spaces, the construction of identity is not – Roguewriter strives to articulate himself more clearly, engage with others more often and more directly and with more enthusiasm (Email interview, 13/07/10) regardless of the space in which he is posting.

As Katie Ellis notes, '[t]he self emerges through perception, meaning and language,' (2010: 39) signalling that Boardies can be in control of how their online identities are realised. In operating in apparent respective public/private spaces of the Board and SNSs, there is a sense that there *is* a compartmentalisation of online identity, but rather than Facebook comprising a saturation of personal information (Ellis 2010: 40), users conceptualise the Board – in its guise as a routine social space – as a more "personal" and "real" space in which to articulate identity. As in Chapter One, "reality" here refers to the notion of presenting an approximation of one's "genuine" persona on the Board, and a constructed performance elsewhere. Fighting Cephalopod for example, notes that 'I tend to self-censor elsewhere and I am much more flippant and silly here,' (Survey response, 13/05/10) and Chubtoad01 notes that

'VA people get my off the wall references that some people elsewhere have no idea [about] and I go nuts explaining it to them.' (Survey response, 27/06/10)

So although (as previously noted by Hawkboy) the Board and SNSs may have differing contexts of operation, Boardies' descriptions of their interaction within the Board – the *way* in which they talk to one another – demonstrate how the Board's position as a regularly visited social space encourages an inflection of online identity deemed more "normal". Because of their cumulative understanding derived as a result of regular consumption of communication, Boardies understand how their use of language will be received. This regularity of consumption means that even though Maggie's categorisation of the Board and Facebook in public/private terms seemingly supports Ellis' view that the private nature of Facebook sees users inundated with "personal" information (2010: 40), Boardies' perception of their communal space does not operate on such a binary.

As Susan Gal notes, "public" and "private" are relative terms and shift according to individual perspectives (2002), meaning that, for example, a home is private when contrasted with the neighbourhood, when at the same time public and private spaces exist within the home (Lange 2007: 365). In this same manner, the Board can initially be seen to be a public space for the way in which unregistered users can read all online content; but knowing the context of who is posting what material, and in what sense they are posting it, transforms how the space is received. As Diana List Cullen notes, 'Knowing what a word means to the "speaker" is particularly crucial where the communication is words on screen only,' (1995: 7) and demonstrating such contextuality, babydoll notes that 'I'm a lot more open on the board because

it's not just random avatars.' (Survey response, 12/05/10) Such a response demonstrates how she is able to see past the "random" avatars, and conceive of "public" posts on a contextual level unattainable to those without the cumulative knowledge that regularity brings. This contextual level could therefore ascribe Board interaction with a degree of privacy in plain sight.

This chapter has examined the way in which the normalisation of computer-mediated-communication practices influence Board activity and the manner in which Boardies conceptualise their use of the Board, particularly through the oral practice of enunciativity. Yet as with his conception of semiotic productivity, Fiske's definition of enunciative practice is concerned with *fan* talk meaning his conceptualisation of community is akin to 'single-issue groups' (Reeves et al., 1996: 24), the consideration of which disregards the fact that community members can form relationships beyond a specific text or fan practice (Chin 2010: 120). Through a practice of social enunciativity – again placing Kevin Smith as the secondary cultural commodity – the Boardies demonstrate their use of a space as a social network site, co-opting Smith's original intent for a fan 'chat-room thing' (Smith 2007: 323) into a social haven familiar through routine. Emlyn's view that 'If there was no board, there would still be fans but very few would be friends' (Survey response, 17/05/10) demonstrates the value the Board has a social conduit, and the notion of a community without the Board will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Stephanie Tuszynski notes that in the tension of the real/virtual binary, the "real" world is conceived as 'one of ordinariness, daily routine, and … which provides more depth of feeling and personal meaning than all the online

interactions any one person could ever have, at least according to some schools of thought.' (2008: 10) Yet what this chapter has demonstrated is that for Boardies, online interaction allows just as valid a form of relationship as off-, and the apparent tension between on- and offline, "real" and "virtual" will be addressed in Section Two. Concluding this section, however, will be a final discussion of purely online operation. The experiential contexts discussed in Chapters Two and Three identify how Boardies function with Smith as the secondary cultural commodity, and Chapter Four will re-examine the complexity of Smith-Boardie relations with these contexts in mind.

Chapter Four

Acquiescence to Producorial Power

Up until this point this section has examined how Boardies and Smith co-exist to allow a construction of an online community that takes as its name the production company owned by Kevin Smith. And it is this notion of "View Askew" as a domineering context – rather than those articulated by Boardies themselves – that this final chapter of Section One will examine. Reflecting the notion repeated throughout this section regarding the fluid and malleable nature of community, this chapter will detail how in opposition to the context of mutual affirmation, where Smith-fan relations are regarded as a paradigm of harmonious producer-fan interactivity, Smith's Board practices are at times regarded differently by members of the culture. Hinted at in Chapter One's process of audience/producer ratification (Figure 10), here it will be expanded that instead of a "utopian" community, Boardies instead concede power to Smith, allowing the capital afforded by his position to dictate functionality. Such a context demonstrates not outright conflict on the Board, but acquiescence to Smith's directives.

In opposition to the "cultural dopes" noted by Lawrence Grossberg, who are 'simply incapable of recognizing that the culture they enjoy is actually being used to dupe and exploit them,' (1992: 51) this section will detail how Boardies actually *embrace* such exploitation in exchange for using the Board. As Grossberg notes, 'people are often quite aware of their own implication in structures of power and domination, and of the ways in which cultural

messages (can) manipulate them.' (1992: 53) Such manipulation by Smith

performs a function whereby (as noted in Chapter One) certain activities are

rewarded and – as will be detailed here – certain activities are outlawed.

Specifically, this chapter will examine the way in which – as a result of

adherence to a context of acquiescence – fan textual productivity is limited by

Smith, finalising this section's examination of the Board in relation to Fiske's

theoretical model.

Producorial Authority and Ownership

In his exploration of *Babylon 5* fans' relationship with programme creator J

Michael Straczynski, Alan Wexelblat examines Straczynski's departure from

the *Babylon 5* Usenet newsgroup, citing it as a decision which 'changed the

character of the newsgroup discussion in many ways' (2002: 222-3). Detailed

as a response to dissatisfaction with fans' attitudes and behaviour towards

himself and other users, Straczynski's actions are used by Wexelblat in order to

raise questions about the way in which disagreements between authors and fans

take place in an "auteur-centred" space, causing fans to adopt 'a model of

censorship that simply denied space for unpopular viewpoints to be heard.'

(2002: 224). This model of self-imposed censorship is significant in this

instance because of the way the initially independent Usenet group became a

site for the constrictive power of the active author (2002: 209) – Straczynski's

participation in online fan communication dominating the culture.

　　　　As noted in Chapter One, Kevin Smith's participation in his own online

fan culture has been similarly domineering through the processes of mutual

affirmation, but rather than the pejorative connotations "domination" suggests, his involvement initially appears to hold significant appeal for fans. Yet his input into the fan culture differs from Straczynski's in that Smith was responsible for the initiation of the Board; he invited fans into his official space, whereas Straczynski joined a fan-initiated area. This distinction is important in accounting for fan self-censorship in response to producer influence on the Board.

As a result of an awareness of Smith's ownership of the Board, Boardies can have a tendency to 'keep Kevin in mind at least most of the time when we are posting,' with bentcountershaft going on to explain that 'I don't want to post something that Kevin just happens to read and get called out for being an idiot.' (Email interview, 20/07/10) In describing the thought process behind his posting practices in this manner, bentcountershaft reveals once more that Smith seemingly enjoys a hierarchal status over that of other Boardies. In a virtual space that bears a mark of his ownership, Smith's approval is sought no matter the subject of, or his direct involvement in, the discussion. Here bentcountershaft reveals that an acknowledgement of Smith's participation is inherent in *every* post he makes by managing content to suit Smith's tastes. Although bentcountershaft does not bemoan Smith's influence, his comments suggest that the Board is susceptible to a hierarchy of constrictive power, similar to that detailed by Wexelblat.

But where such a dynamic has already been explored in Chapter One, the fact that bentcountershaft's observation comes just one day after a Board post made by Smith reveals a context whereby Smith's judgemental dominance is made apparent. Initiated by Smith and featuring just one post, the first thread

on Board v.3 features the producer iterating his stance on tolerated Board

conduct, and has since remained permanently on display at the head on the

Board:

> To stay on the board, simply behave. … [W]e still reserve the right to
> remove posts and ban any individual we feel is acting inappropriately in
> our forum, just as we have since 1996. Any Chicken Little ready to cry
> censorship need only be reminded that the World Famous View Askew
> Message Board is NOT a free speech forum; it's a place for fans and
> friends to gather and exchange ideas or bullshit with one another. …
> Here, your license to post, quite like your license to drive, is a privilege,
> not a right. (Smith, Board post, 19/07/10)

Framed by this strong behavioural directive, the previously noted fan

perception of Smith's Board participation as a peer must be read in terms

relative to this imposed (rather than welcomed) hierarchal status, a position

Johnboy describes as 'godfather of this particular place, and you tow the line or

else.' (Email interview, 14/07/10) Noting that any user who claims their

opinions are censored should remind themselves of his rules, Smith's stance on

Boardie behaviour questions the extent to which censorship is actually self-

imposed. Rather than adjusting behaviour in the presence of the object of

fandom (as is the case with J. Michael Straczynski and the *Babylon 5* fans), all

fan practices on the Board are contextualised by Smith's authority. As Johnboy

notes, 'I follow Kevin's rules even when I disagree with them; that's the price

of admission,' (Email interview, 14/07/10) demonstrating that to practice either

fandom or sociality on the Board one must agree to abide by a code of conduct

– "official" Kevin Smith fandom is therefore regulated by Smith's own

criteria.

Wexelblat details how in response to Straczynski's decision to stop

posting on Usenet, one fan exclaimed 'Now that the King is dead perhaps this

group might get an injection of democracy.' (2002: 224) Such an interpretation of the culture – that of an explicit hierarchy favouring producorial power – has been consistently apparent with users of the Board. In a stark contrast to the dismissive manner in which that fan derided Straczynski's participation, Roguewriter summarises Smith (and Schwalbach's) involvement on the Board as 'a pretty friendly oligarchy', noting that 'This corner of the world ain't a free-reign democracy, though it's closer than most.' (Email interview, 13/07/10) Here Roguewriter addresses the fact that ownership of the Board lies exclusively with the producorial contingent, rather than any other users; Smith's governance of the space, whilst friendly, still constitutes an autocracy that doesn't allow for communal decisions, which appears striking given the way communal social practice has thrived (as detailed in Chapters Two and Three).

This acknowledgement of an explicit power dynamic existing between Smith and his fans strikes a contrast with the *Babylon 5* Usenet fans, where interpretation of fan behaviour in the presence of Straczynski caused dissention (Wexelblat 2002: 223). On the Board however, there appears to be an acceptance of the hierarchy that informs posting behaviour. Babydoll, for example, notes that 'while Kevin and Jen might join in the conversation just like anyone else, it has always been very clear that they are in charge and it's their place.' (Email interview, 23/07/10) There is an acknowledgement of Smith and Schwalbach's participation, yet here there is a caveat that the pair 'will never truly be just "regular" Boardies. They are celebrities.' (slithybill, email interview, 19/07/10) Such awareness feeds into the notion of producer→audience hierarchy noted in Chapter One, where Smith-Boardie

friendships are performed within Smith's producorial rhetoric. But the responses of babydoll and slithybill demonstrate how the implementation of producorial rhetoric to the context of Smith-Boardie relations is accepted and embraced as a necessary dynamic for Board function, despite the implicit inequality. Here then the Boardies acquiesce to Smith's power, understanding that although a tacit dynamic of friendship can exist, Smith's overriding context of ownership rules.

However, through his belief that although not a democracy the fan community is 'closer than most', Roguewriter suggests an awareness of the extent of the lack of liberty the producorial hierarchy enforces, and a subsequent justification as to why it is tolerated. Roguewriter's justification is important to understanding why such a seemingly heavy-handed approach by Smith is accepted, as although Smith (and by proxy Schwalbach) are explicitly marked as owners of the Board, the general opinion that they are well-liked – Roguewriter mentions that 'Jen's a sweetheart' (Email interview, 13/07/10) – seems to play heavily in fan opinion of how they function within the fan culture. Ruth, for example, notes that 'Kevin, and more so Jen, are very approachable and actively want to be part of the community,' despite their apparent hierarchal positions (Email interview, 14/07/10).

One Boardie (wishing to remain anonymous) ascribes the differing responses to Smith and Schwalbach's "ownership" of the Board as being very much 'dependent on who they are friends with.' (Email interview, 14/07/10) It is telling that in expressing this opinion this Boardie wishes to remain anonymous, and such a choice signals the way in which criticism of particular groups on the Board has the potential to be inflammatory. It can be assumed

then that not only are Smith and Schwalbach well liked, but criticism of the
two is not an acceptable practice. The limitation of criticism of Smith plays
into the way textual productivity is implemented on the Board, and will be
discussed further below.

Yet despite the differences in opinion, the collective fan responses
seems to ultimately have Smith and Schwalbach occupying dual roles within
the community: as perpetuators of the Board's hierarchal structure, and as
Boardies themselves. Sandvoss has previously questioned whether 'the
pleasures of fandom are *necessarily* constructed in opposition to the dominant
power system,' (2005: 14) and the structure of the Board seems to suggest an
agreement with this supposition. In contrast to the dominant discourse of
resistance in fan studies (Sandvoss 2005: 11-43) what is apparent on the Board
and Boardies' relationships with Smith, is that the fan culture functions via a
context of acquiescence, embracing a producorial hierarchy in order to regulate
fan activity.

Constraining Textual Productivity

The presence of the context of acquiescence helps to establish why discussion
of "traditional" fan activities is largely absent from the accounts in this study.
A brief comparison to the practices of Jenkins' textual poachers (1992), for
example, demonstrates how Smith's presence on the Board – whilst providing
a key appeal for the fandom – actually serves to constrain textual
productivities, the types of activity Fiske describes thusly:

> Fans produce and circulate among themselves texts which are often crafted with production values as high as in official culture. The key differences between the two are economic rather than ones of competence, for fans do not write or produce their texts for money; indeed, their productivity typically costs them money. … There is also a difference in circulation; because fan texts are not produced for profit, they do not need to be mass-marketed, so unlike official culture, fan culture makes no attempt to circulate its texts outside its own community. (1992: 39)

Considering textual productivities in her description of *The X-Files*' "X-Philes" in relation to Jenkins' work, Bambi Haggins notes that:

> … unlike Jenkins' textual poachers, whose "struggle with and against the meanings imposed upon them by their borrowed materials" resonates with a sort of dissonance as their readings "confront media representations on an unequal plane," the X-Philes' negotiations with the text are more akin to contrapuntal refrains (33). Their struggle "with and against" the "imposed" meaning mirrors the ambiguities and conflicts imbedded in the narrative arcs of the series. In their negotiated readings of *The X-Files*, X-Philes create a space in which frustration, ironic distance, and incredulousness coexist with the ability to muse playfully about the current social mileu and the desire to believe that there are, indeed, *truths* to be found. (2001: 10)

Although Haggins uses an *X-Files* pun to establish her point, a follow-up question can be asked of Boardies – what interpretive "truths" can there be for the Smith fans who acknowledge that Smith already shares to excess, and where – via the context of history as semiotic resource – the "truths" are already said to have been found?

In his analysis of an exchange between Smith and an audience member in the Q&A DVD release *An Evening with Kevin Smith* (2002), Carter Soles argues that Smith actively quashes such interpretive truths, with any "oppositional" productivity discouraged as a result (2008: 374-90). Discussing a question regarding the possibly negative representation of homosexuality in *Chasing Amy* that 'abandons its jokiness fairly quickly and takes on a more

emotionally charged tone that is unusual for the Q & A encounters' (2008:

376-7), Soles observes that during the exchange:

> [Smith's] … comments … make clear that his enthusiasm is
> exaggerated, and [his] rhetorical mission from this point forward will
> be to close [question-asker] Lela's line of inquiry down, covering it
> over with the same stock defenses he has offered in response to this
> critique in the past … And his manner changes: he gets touchy,
> defensive, and begins a proactive verbal assault on her (as yet not fully
> stated) position. (2008: 378-80)

Noting his distaste at Smith's 'bullying' tactics (2008: 387), Soles believes that

Smith's assertion that "It is … the Kevin Smith show" and subsequent

domination of the conversation 'rhetorically indicate that Smith is in the power

position' (2008: 380). Soles initially conceives of the *Evening with* series as

'by, for, and about Kevin Smith's View Askew fans,' (2008: 374), yet as his

reading demonstrates, it is actually about Smith furthering his agenda as caring

producer and directives for an interpretation of his work.[31] As Smith has

previously noted, 'On the View Askew movies, since I'm the author, I can

always say, with absolute certainty, that my opinion on any creative decision

isn't simply opinion; it's fact, truth, and the way it has to be for everything in

the picture to work.' (Smith 2009b) Smith's belief in the power of authorship

prioritises his opinion above any other, limiting his allowance for

interpretations that differ from his own.

Interestingly, such practices of producorial rhetoric have been similarly

practiced on the Board: Tarhook for example notes that 'You read old posts of

[Kevin's] and he refers to the board as "his house" or "his kitchen"' (Survey

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[31] Smith's "oversharing" might be thought of as a concerted effort to manage fans' perception
of him and his activities.

response, 17/05/10). The Board could thusly be similarly categorised as "the Kevin Smith show", where – like the anonymous Boardie's comments which demonstrate how criticism of Smith is not a favourable practice – criticism of Smith's work is similarly frowned upon.[32] Such a dynamic is similar to that discussed by Suzanne Scott in her study of *Battlestar Galactica* fans' consumption of producer Ronald D. Moore's podcasts, where she notes that 'fans' consumption of the podcasts is intimately bound up with the acceptance of Moore's word as law and the occasional desire to flout that law.' (2008: 219) Yet despite any "occasional desire", channels of interpretation are constricted by Smith, and there is less scope for fans to express their own interpretations about Smith and his work in more "traditional" fan practices. Yet rather than an issue of legality, as has been previously examined in fan studies (Brooker 2002; Jenkins 2006), here we can theorise that this process is simply a matter of containing a potentially defensive or offended response from Smith.

As a result, semiotic, enunciative, and textual productivities are not widely practiced when considering Kevin Smith as the primary cultural commodity. Yet this section has already demonstrated that in considering the fan community itself the primary cultural commodity, semiotic and enunciative productivities are possible. The restrictions on Boardies' textual productivities therefore arguably add to the Board's status as the primary cultural commodity of the community. By disallowing alternate readings – where the "correct" meanings have been assigned to the past – the Board does not allow space for

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[32] Doubly in this case, for as previously noted *discussion* of Smith's work is already discouraged at this point, and criticism would likely add further fuel to the fire.

new, oppositional readings to take place, and instead by necessity "off-topic" discussion occurs.

"Official" Fan Space, Emotion and Entitlement

Adherence to the context of acquiescence means that – in contrast to the *Buffy* fans who were content to create their own space in response to the closure of the Bronze (Gatson and Zweerink 2004; Ali 2009) – Boardies actively welcome the "official" label that the View Askew Message Board offers. The issue of the official versus any unofficial space was raised in July 2010 when, in response to the repeated posting of material deemed objectionable by Smith, all use of the Board was suspended for an indefinite amount of time. During this period, Boardies established an "Emergency Backup Board" – a forum used as a space to 'touch base with other [Boardies]' (Talos, email interview 14/07/10) whilst the Board itself was inaccessible.

However, despite its fast adoption by Boardies, when discussing the role of the EBB its function as a *backup* was never in doubt. As Ruth notes, she heard about it and 'settled there while waiting for updates from Kevin,' (Email interview, 14/07/10) demonstrating that although the community has the resources to transfer their group to another virtual space, approval from Smith is still desired. The difference between a Smith-sanctioned Board and a fan-established space was emphasised in the description from the anonymous Boardie, who believed the EBB became 'a place for panicked conjecture, blame and generally shittiness that wasn't allowed on Kevin's board' (Email interview, 14/07/10). This again suggests that despite Smith's strong

behavioural directives, the hierarchal context of acquiescence on the Board is embraced as a structure that promotes order, whilst criticism of Smith's practices remains something one is unable to freely articulate.

Yet this lack of "freedom" is preferred by some: Roguewriter was one Boardie who opted out of joining the EBB during the Board's hiatus, and his reasons for not taking part reflect a desire for maintaining the experiential contexts of Board operation:

> [W]hen I finally joined the Board, it was like coming home. It felt like a place I could really enjoy on the Internet … The idea of just abandoning that place and running off and trying to forge some pale imitation elsewhere? I don't completely get it, nor like the idea. 1) What drew me to the VA Board was Kevin and his movies; what kept me around were all the other people. Yes, many of them moved to the backup board… [but] that backup site didn't seem like…home. I was an Army brat for 18 years, and have lived in two countries, 15 states and 16 homes over the years. I am very big on "home." I know that should equate to people, not surroundings, but…2) Loyalty. There's this: What does it say to Kevin and Jen and [webmaster] Ming if everyone just up and vacates to some low-rent replacement digs? (Email interview, 13/07/10)

Roguewriter's justification for remaining absent from the EBB plays into this section's descriptions of Boardies' experiential contexts. In citing ideas of authenticity and loyalty in keeping him from migrating to the new online space, Roguewriter adheres to the qualities which Smith most readily affirms. In addition, demonstrating his use of history as semiotic resource, he references his initial fandom of Smith giving way to feelings of community. With his reference to the Board as "home" he makes it clear that visiting the online space of the Board has become a familiar and comfortable part of his routine. Finally, in referring to the EBB as a "pale imitation" of the Board, Roguewriter reveals that the official nature of the Board holds appeal, and to spurn the

Board would be interpreted as a slight towards Smith and Schwalbach –
something the context of acquiescence forbids. The converse side effect of
fans' preference for an "official" space to practice fandom is the fear that the
space may cease to exist altogether. That fear almost became reality with the
temporary shutdown of the Board,[33] yet there is also fear from fans that beyond
the surface nature of the message board format, the makeup of Board culture
itself may be compromised, namely by a change in Smith's posting practices.

As seen in discussions of the context of mutual affirmation, Smith's
interaction with fans has become a commonplace occurrence, to the point that
when asked "How would you feel towards Kevin if he refused to interact with
fans at all?" respondents expressed bemusement that such an event would
transpire. Yzzie for instance answered that if Smith were to 'suddenly change'
in this manner, she'd 'understand he would have his reason[s],' (Survey
response, 12/05/10) with Ruth similarly stating 'I doubt that would happen'
(Survey response, 12/05/10). Yet a repeated concern for Boardies is Smith's
apparent preference of other social networking sites – in particular Twitter –
over the Board. Although in embracing this form of social media Smith's
interaction with audiences is still a tangible and prominent aspect of his
producorial persona, for Boardies it represents a reality over concerns of
Smith's current level of involvement in the fan community, particularly
relative to his previous frequency of engagement.

For example, Duff notes that the reason he began posting on the Board
was 'Mainly to see what Kevin had to say, before he "moved" to Twitter'

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[33] In fact the Board reopened a week later, a point which will be further explored in the
Conclusion.

(Survey response, 13/05/10), whilst Dianae feels that Smith's interaction on the Board is not as integral to the culture 'since Twitter and Facebook took off' (Survey response, 13/05/10). In contrast to the way Boardies are able to adopt use of SNSs into their wider web use that still includes the Board, there is the perception that Smith's web use is more restrictive – he tends to choose one space over the other. Cathy appears understanding about Smith's level of participation and adoption of SNSs: 'Twitter suits Kevin's personality down to the ground – wide access, relatively trivial interaction. It was always nice when you'd make a joke and Kevin would register his mirth … but I get why he doesn't really post any more.' (Survey response, 13/05/10) Cathy recognises the role that the context of mutual affirmation plays in Smith-Boardie relations, appearing wistful for a time when Smith would more readily interact. Yet in understanding that Twitter provides an opportunity for a producer to interact with a wider range of audiences, Cathy demonstrates that there isn't any particular ill will towards Smith – she understands his diminished posting activity and is dismayed – but isn't overtly hostile.

However, in labelling interaction on Twitter as "relatively trivial", Cathy implies that the social enunciativity on the Board holds a higher degree of importance, and Smith's embrace of Twitter is perhaps to his detriment. As Ruth Deller notes, although the style and content of tweets 'varies from simple link sharing or retweeting with little to no commentary, to one-to-one conversation, to talk between a small number of users engaging in direct address … the most common tweets take the form of one to many conversation' (2011). It appears that Cathy places Smith's use of this one to many paradigm relative to the 'sense of group discussion and accumulation

that you can get [via the Board] format,' (Survey response, 13/05/10) opining that fan interaction via Twitter is unfavourable and impersonal when compared to the sense of community and the way personal relationships can be cultivated on the Board via the on-going contexts of history as semiotic resource and regularity and CMC.

Building on this tentatively discordant observation of Smith's diminishing presence, babydoll and Bwayne each take a much firmer stance on Smith's level of participation. Explaining his own diminishing posting activity, Bwayne cites Smith's "desertion" of the Board for Twitter as the main reason (Survey response, 13/05/10). Although we can see some parallels here with the *Babylon 5* fans who decided to leave the Usenet group after Straczynski's departure (Wexelblat 2002: 224), Bwayne's feeling that Smith has somehow forsaken the Board in favour of a different audience reemphasises the value that Smith's presence has to the Board. As Bwayne notes, 'the community *exists* mainly due to Kevin's interaction with the fans' (Survey response 13/05/10, my emphasis).

Similarly, babydoll describes Smith's social network practices as an "abandonment" of the Board (Email interview, 23/07/10), and the strength of feeling here seems to suggest that Smith's pursuit of a wider audience leaves Boardies with a sense of rejection. The manner in which the responses are framed is reminiscent of Brooker's study of fan responses to *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (1999). Brooker states that because of a lifelong investment in the *Star Wars* mythos, fans could assert a particular ownership of the saga. Fans believe that the time put into the fandom gives them an 'emotional claim' to the saga to which 'new' fans are not privy (2002:

85). The distinction and tension made here between "old" and "new" fans plays out similarly in Boardies' attitudes towards Smith and his use of Twitter. With their community's long-standing adherence to Smith' producorial rhetoric Boardies can similarly claim an emotional entitlement to Smith's affections.

Yet it must be questioned to what extent Boardies are entitled to their entitlement. As a media producer keen on promoting his own output, Smith's actions demonstrate that he does not adhere to the same experiential contexts as the Boardies, proving that he cannot be categorised as "just" a Boardie. I would suggest that Smith's beatification of the authorship position, transposed to the Board, identifies the way in which he conceives of the Board as functioning primarily as a Kevin Smith fan space. It is when this is no longer apparently the case – as seen in the way the Board is shaped by contexts of history and regularity – that Smith opts to reach a different audience and seek new sources of revenue. For as he has noted to Boardies in the past:

> Y'know what a n00b is to *me*? Someone who likes what I do and only just now discovered there was a place he or she could come to possibly interact with a filmmaker they dig. Fresh blood (and, yes – fresh cash). (Board post, 15/07/07)

As a result, although Smith's role as friendly producer is ratified by Boardies in the context of affirmation, one might subsequently view his affirmation of Boardies in a fairly cynical manner. Kurt Lancaster casts similar aspersions on Straczynski's interactions with *Babylon 5* fans, noting that at times 'we can begin to see cracks appear in the social front persona known professionally as J. Michael Straczynski.' (2001: 4) Smith's open desire to welcome new fans as revenue generators signals that in addition to wanting to use an officially

sanctioned space, Boardies' context of acquiescence may be in deference to knowledge of Smith's persona as a carefully constructed mediation, where they similarly play a role of active fans.

Chapter One's context of mutual affirmation demonstrated the Smith-Boardie relationship in personal, rather than professionally mediated terms. Yet what the context of acquiescence to producorial power has shown, is that in contrast there almost certainly is a power differential in Smith-Boardie relations when ownership of the online space is discussed. As a result, in tolerating Smith's domineering persona, the Boardies perpetuate his mediation of the understanding and friendly producer; the alternative to this "price of admission" is to be cast out of the community – an unappealing prospect when considering the Board's role as a SNS.

In controlling the types of fan productivity that occur surrounding his output, Smith demonstrates the cyclical nature of the experiential contexts of history and regularity. These contexts have been allowed to thrive because of the limitations on fan productivities, but as a result of a lack of fan productivity, *Board* productivity – that which perpetuates online sociality – has become more abundant. Such a cycle demonstrates the way in which the context of acquiescence is useful counterpoint to the context of mutual affirmation, as both represent malleable processes where producer and fan roles can change, altering the makeup of fan space.

Conclusion

Throughout this section, I have detailed the way in which the online space of the View Askew Message Board has functioned according to the experiential contexts of users, derived from hermeneutic analysis of survey responses and interviews. Such contexts necessarily lead to a discussion of how "Kevin Smith fandom" can be readily defined. Although the introduction to Section One posited that fandom is a given – that all those on the Board hold some latent affection for Kevin Smith in some manner – what Boardies' experiential contexts have revealed is that the concept of "Kevin Smith fandom" is in a state of flux. The experiential contexts depict an image of the functionality of users of the View Askew Message Board, but fail to adequately explain how Kevin Smith is able to remain a key symbolic figure of the community in the face of practices apparently antithetical to "fandom" (as it is traditionally understood).

Andrea MacDonald notes that 'fandom views itself as being antithetical to "mundane" social norms' (1998: 136), yet the Smith fan culture repeatedly demonstrates an adherence to such structures of "mundanity". Through the discourses of affirmation, passivity, and regularity, the fans of the Board show that such practices are inflected as part of everyday, regular routine – that fandom isn't necessarily a unique compartmentalised pastime – but an aspect of identity that is more readily integrated into everyday life. Such a conclusion is not to say that fandom of Smith is stagnant – as the following section will present, offline fan practices show that celebration of Smith is still a key aspect of the culture. However, this section demonstrates that categorising Boardies as simply "Kevin Smith fans" may be a reductive assessment, and that their

relationship between "fan" social and cultural capital is a more complex

arrangement where "*fan* prestige" is not necessarily the key component.

Section Two

Offline Backchannelling

In describing some of the methodological challenges for her research on *Buffy* fandom, Stephanie Tuszynski notes that '*There is no way to chronicle the existence of this community by looking only at the virtual component,*' (2008: 7, emphasis in original), observing that:

> Online groups are often like icebergs; the majority of the structure is not immediately visible. A virtual forum is only the most visible part of a group. Bronzers themselves call it "backchannelling" – contact is maintained through other electronic means like message programs as well as through phone conversations and even visits. (2008: 7)

Aspects of this backchannelling activity for Boardies has been detailed in Section One, where in discussing their experiential contexts research participants described the ways in which other online outlets, such as social networking sites, enabled them to cultivate an online social network with the Board as a central hub. Yet as Tuszynski notes, offline backchannelling is a similarly vital way in which to measure the activity of an online community. Indeed, "even" face-to-face visits are a common way in which fan groups coalesce (Bacon-Smith 1992; Brooker 2002; Zubernis and Larsen 2012), and previous literature has demonstrated how such sociality can help strengthen notions of fan community (Gatson and Zweerink 2004: 65). Boardies are no strangers to such activity, and what this section will examine is how – in relation to the experiential contexts detailed in Section One – Boardie identity is shaped by offline activity.

Gatson and Zweerink note that 'Networks are at once artifacts of past experiences as well as ever-changing in their contents and contexts' (2004: 92), and as Section One similarly demonstrated, the construction of Boardie identity is not a linear process: varying points of entry, strength of relationships, and degrees of social and cultural capital all contribute to individuals' conception of community and their place within it. The scattered nature of community construction therefore means that the relationship between on- and offline Boardie practice – and how such practices (in both directions) inform the community – cannot be charted in a simple manner. Nancy Baym notes that 'The sense of shared space, rituals of shared practices, and exchange of social support all contribute to a feeling of community in digital environments,' (2010: 86) and while in this section I will demonstrate how a sense of digital community transfers to the physical, I will not be suggesting it is a sequential process. Rather, much like that detailed in Section One, I will argue that it is cyclical in nature, with initial online relationships leading to stronger face-to-face interpersonal ties, which can then in turn pave way for the strengthening of "virtual" communication – a product of the Kevin Smith fan culture that I will term the on- and offline sociality cycle.

The presence of the cycle in Boardie culture signals the way in which the conception of a measurable "fan community" exemplified by use of a central online hub (Beddows 2008: 127) is not necessarily sufficient to chart respective instances of fan practice. Instead, building on Tuszynski's work that offers a contribution to the study of community within a "real"/"virtual" binary, this section will present a construction of Boardie identity that circumvents these oppositions, suggesting that such distinctions are supplanted

– if not made redundant – by the experiences of Boardies' offline backchannelling.

In detailing the nature of Boardies' construction of offline community, Chapter Five begins by detailing the offline activities that occurred during a Boardie meetup, considering the productivities in relation to similar tensions of the extent of fandom from Section One. Examining aspects of my own experience as a scholar-fan in the field, this chapter offers an analysis of Boardies' offline practices and how they can be addressed in relation to contexts of Smith/the Board as the primary cultural commodity of the community. Chapter Five suggests that "Boardie" identity, despite being named for the official cyber space of Kevin Smith fandom, can be co-opted to include offline practices as well, signalling that the boundaries of community are not restricted to online space.

Following this, and building on the collapsing distinction between on- and offline Board functionality, I explore how the dissolution of a real/virtual binary can affect Boardies' categorisation of their community. Depicting Boardies' move from descriptions of "other fans" to "family", here Chapter Six questions the extent to which the on- and offline sociality cycle promotes a greater degree of intimacy and togetherness.

As noted previously, Garry Crawford believes that being a fan is tied into individual and group social performances, which are rarely set or coherent (2012: 102), and Section Two offers an examination of Boardies' offline performances to help inform a fuller picture of how Kevin Smith fan identity is constructed. In relation to Section One, the findings here demonstrate further

how experiential contexts complicate the fan relationship with their chosen

text, where even though symbolic capital can be similarly invoked, sociality is

still prioritised.

Chapter Five

Offline Activities

In August 2010 Kevin Smith marked his 40th birthday with a Q&A show –
Kevin Smith: Too Fat for 40! – at the Count Basie Theater in Red Bank, New
Jersey. Similar to the celebration of his 37th birthday,[34] Smith hosted the Q&A
in his hometown, meaning that the event took place within walking distance of
View Askew film locations and his comic book and merchandise store "Jay
and Silent Bob's Secret Stash". Such a location meant that this event could
allow fans an opportunity to indulge themselves in Smith-related activities,
with Tears In Rain noting that 'my favorite thing of Kevin's is his events. I
plan my vacation for the whole year around them and attend as many as
possible.' (Survey response, 13/05/10) This chapter draws on my own
experience of a Boardie meetup during the period 31st July - 3rd August 2010,
where in addition to attendance at the Q&A Boardies organized other social
activities, and here I will examine these activities in relation to the experiential
contexts of Board practice noted in Section One. In doing this, I will determine
the extent to which "Boardie" identity can be conceived as an off- as well as
online practice, and how the mores of the Board similarly occur in offline
interaction. Here I highlight how meetup culture helps to develop and maintain
a sense of the communal, and to what extent Smith's symbolic capital and role
as cultural commodity plays in offline situations.

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[34] 37 being a number repeatedly deemed significant in View Askew lore due to its initial use in
Clerks dialogue (Dante: 'My girlfriend sucked 37 dicks!' Customer: 'In a row?').

Research and Sociality

My initial approaches to conducting offline research in Red Bank and the

surrounding area reflect my trepidation at posting on the Board in 2003 (noted

in Chapter Two). Aware then of how a display of poor fan cultural capital may

affect integration, what concerned me during the 2010 trip was how an overly-

academic approach may have a negative impact on my ability to socialise.

Aware of a previous online incident where my use of a formal academic tone

invited hostility, my actions in Red Bank were inflected by wariness that in

attempting to tread the line between scholar and fan, there was a potential risk

of alienating myself from both groups.

Prior to the trip my questionnaire data confirmed that meetups held

importance for Boardies. Although Princess Muse noted '... I guess other

groups have meet ups and events and such' (Survey response, 12/05/10), there

seemed to be a general feeling that meetups were a significant milestone in

Boardie interaction. Syracuselaxfan notes, for example:

> In early 2008 Kevin invited any Boardie who wanted to be an extra in
> *Zack and Miri* to come down to Monroeville and participate. This was
> my first "meetup" with other members of the board. I'm a fairly shy
> person, but I introduced myself to some people and was welcomed in
> with open arms. It was quite a wonderful feeling. (Survey response,
> 27/06/10)

Such positivity was encouraging, and was reflected by Fenderboy who noted

that his first meetup 'was one of the best experiences I've ever had.' (Survey

response, 12/05/10). These testimonies suggest that meetups do indeed

cultivate a very friendly and welcoming atmosphere, where significant bonds

were formed as a result of shared fan cultural experience. As noted above, I

was apprehensive that my research intentions might interfere with the socialisation process, and although by their interaction with me on the Board and participation in my research Boardies had shown that my research was not an overriding factor to our relationship, I nonetheless felt anxious about meeting in a situation where my primary goal was research.

My first interaction with a Boardie in New Jersey was with Haar, who was staying at a hotel adjacent to mine. We met with the intention of conducting an interview, however as we journeyed to a nearby restaurant my scholarly intentions were tempered by my desire to connect with a fellow fan on an interpersonal level: it felt impolite to so immediately launch into a more formal interview situation. I was not entirely familiar with Haar from the Board, and as such felt I should make an attempt to know more about him before asking him to divulge his thoughts and feeling to me "on the record". In doing this, I was aware that the most obvious connection we shared was our Kevin Smith fandom – thus meaning we had an immediate conversation starter. However, my desire to talk directly about Smith was tempered by two factors. Firstly, by talking about our fandom informally I was aware of the risk of the conversation slipping into areas I wanted to cover in the interview process. Intending to make the interview a more smooth (and enjoyable) experience, I wanted to avoid repetition of topics. Secondly, aware of the way in which the Board had shifted towards Smith being the secondary cultural commodity, discussion of him felt as if it may have been base – that instantly relying on reference to Smith might be conversationally lazy and at odds with the Board's off-topic approach to sociality.

Therefore, my approach to this initial interaction with Haar – and subsequently the rest of my research participants on the trip – was to spend time getting to know him in a personal manner, separate from his Kevin Smith fandom. Such a tactic appeared to be welcomed by interviewees, possibly because of the way it mirrored the normative online interaction as noted in Chapter Two. For example, when discussing the nature of "off-topic" sociality with Syracuselaxfan, he noted plainly 'We just don't really talk about [Kevin during meetups] – I wish I had a better answer for you!' (Live interview, 01/08/10) Hinting at offline practice similarly following a pattern of Smith as the secondary cultural commodity to the community, Syracuselaxfan was able to confirm that the tactics I had employed were acceptable.

Later during the trip, I was able to experience a more explicit "mentoring" process thanks to Tears In Rain who noted, '... whenever I go to events I try to make sure everybody's included, has a good time, the same way I did [at my first meetup]' (Live interview, 02/08/10). Similar to Syracuselaxfan guiding my meetup entrée, Tears In Rain discusses his mentor status within the community – a stark contrast to the manner in which users are expected to learn aspects of Board operation for themselves online. Much like the *Star Trek* "Welcommittee" members who can act as 'mentors to complete neophytes' (Bacon-Smith 1992: 82) Tears In Rain acts as the self-appointed "Funbassador", actively involving attendees in as many activities as possible through acts such as organising Q&A tickets for attendees and co-ordinating social events. The presence of such fans who take it upon themselves to explicitly guide attendees in etiquette strikes a stark contrast to the implied guidelines of the Board FAQs. Subsequently, it is clear that offline interaction

between Boardies prioritises aspects of socialisation. As will be discussed below, the opportunity for Boardies to "lurk" offline is reduced when mentors such as Syracuselaxfan and Tears In Rain make a concerted effort to promote inclusivity.

Cult Geographies

Travelling to Red Bank for the research trip was an exciting prospect for me as a Smith fan because of the personal and textual significance locations had for Smith and his output, and Carter Soles has noted how important Smith's Jersey-specific biography has been to his mediated persona (2008: 355-7). Such spots can be defined as cult geographies; the 'diegetic and pro-filmic spaces (and "real" spaces associated with cult icons) which cult fans take as the basis for material, touristic practices' (Hills 2002: 144), and because of my familiarity of the New Jersey locations – from seeing them in View Askew productions, and hearing about them via various DVD commentaries, interviews, and podcasts – the journey to Red Bank could be identified as a form of "pilgrimage" (King 1993; Brooker 2006; Couldry 2007). In order to capitalise on the opportunity to take in these locations, prior to the trip (via the Board) I helped to organise a location tour taking in the Secret Stash (*Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*), Jack's Music Shoppe (*Chasing Amy*), the Quick Stop convenience store and RST Video (*Clerks*, *Chasing Amy*, and *Clerks II*), the Marina Diner (*Chasing Amy*), and the car park of Spirits Unlimited liquor store (*Clerks II*). What is interesting about these locations is that with the exception of the Smith-owned Secret Stash, the rest of the sites are public and generally

unspectacular places – everyday establishments for non-Smith fans, but notable to those who have an interest in Kevin Smith and his work.

Nick Couldry likens such fan pilgrimage to Michael Sallnow's work on pilgrimage by Peruvian Indians to Christian sites made sacred before the Conquest: 'Sallnow analyses these pilgrimages as affirmations of difference, "project[ing] one's local ethnic status ... onto a wider translocal landscape, where it begins to acquire a more categorical meaning" (Sallnow 1987: 204, cited in 2000: 73) Yet in his study of Granada studio tours of *Coronation Street* fans, Couldry contends this notion by arguing that despite offering some affirmation of class or regional identity on a wider scale (given that *Coronation Street* is a nationally popular British television soap opera), the physical Coronation Street set is a fiction and tours reveal how that fiction is constructed, often to some disappointment. (2000: 74-5).

In contrast, the View Askew location tour reaffirms fandom of Smith rather than being a disappointment. Although the locations serve as the setting for the fictional inhabitants of the View Askewniverse, their personal importance to Smith can make fans feel closer to him: TheManWhoLikesSMod, for example, takes particular pride in the fact that he and Smith have a shared New Jersey heritage (Survey response, 14/05/10). Part of the appeal of the New Jersey locations comes in one of the differences between the Askewniverse and *Coronation Street* examples – that of the use of pre-existing locations and a purpose built set. Indeed, that the New Jersey locations are places where Smith has lived, worked, socialised, and discussed (Biskind 2004: 175) marks their distinction as spaces of note. Bank HoldUp characterises Smith's frequent trumpeting of his Jersey-centric biography as

meaning that 'Leonardo New Jersey is now a mythological town like Gotham and Metropolis',[35] (Bank HoldUp, survey response, 15/05/10) and the ascription of "mythical" status signals the way in which visiting the locations allows for a similar process of affirmation as examined in Chapter One.

Couldry notes that the *Coronation Street* set visits affirm 'not necessarily values associated with … the programme, or even with the act of watching it. What is affirmed, more fundamentally, are the values condensed in the symbolic hierarchy of the media frame itself: its symbolic division of the social world into two [– "media space" and one's "ordinary life"]' (2000: 87) In referring to fan pilgrimage in this way, Couldry makes clear the function of cult geographies as spaces which promote division and highlight boundaries between producers and audiences. The View Askew location tour, in contrast, functions according to similar notions of Smith's "friendly producer" persona. Although the locations visited are similarly those which may maintain the boundaries between Smith and his fans – between powerful and powerless (McKee 2004) – they still represent Smith's own "ordinary life" before his success, and that with which he still maintains ties.[36]

Yet it cannot be denied that however culturally important the locations are to those familiar with Smith and his work, such "specialness" is not necessarily felt by all. In detailing the nature of *X-Files* locations in

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[35] Leonardo is the township adjacent to Red Bank, where the Quick Stop is specifically located. It was most prominently featured in *Clerks: The Animated Series*, where the antagonist Leonardo Leonardo was named for the town in which it was set.

[36] Smith's mother – introduced specifically as part of the audience during both the *Threevening* and *Too Fat for Forty* Q&A shows – still resides in Red Bank; and Smith has invited family members and other friends (still New Jersey inhabitants) to contribute to various podcasts on his SModcast Network.

Vancouver, Matt Hills co-opts John Urry's notion of the "tourist gaze" (1990),

believing that:

> [T]he "tourist gaze" of the cult fan [is] an *unheimlich* manoeuvre
> (Freud 1919) insofar as Vancouver can be at once both familiar … and
> exotic ... The "tourist gaze" is thereby transformed into a focused and
> knowledgeable search for authenticity and "reality"; the truth is literally
> supposed to be found right here. (2002: 147-8)

Through my own experience, it is evident that the Red Bank locations are

subject to a similar tourist gaze, where these regular locales – despite being

coded as "everyday places" (Brooker 2006: 13) – can be imbibed with an

exotic aura. It was during the location tours that the exotic aura sensed (only)

by fans became more apparent. Lining up for photo opportunities along the

pavement (Figure 13) or in car parks (Figure 14, Figure 15) would invite stares

from curious onlookers – possibly aware of the touristic appeal Kevin Smith

has for Red Bank (Biese 2009) – but perhaps not wholly aware of why these

particular places would be hubs of fan activity. Such an occurrence signals the

way in which cult geographies are spaces in which the 'locations may

themselves be banal … [and the] privileging of locations will also depend on

the extent to which they relate back to factors which have already been

identified within the fan culture as particularly characteristic of the original

text.' (Hills 2002: 149) Boardies' knowledge of (their perception of) the

cultural significance of the locations – over that of some Red Bank locals –

mirrors the public/private operation of the Board noted in Chapter Three,

where the initially "public" Red Bank spaces are there for all to visit, but

inflected with the knowledge of Smith's work the locations become subject to

the gaze of a private community in plain sight.

Figure 13: Photo opportunities at Jack's Music Shoppe.

Figure 14: Outside the Marina Diner.

Figure 15: Ignoring passing traffic from the car park of Spirits Unlimited.

Such knowledge of the public/private distinction of fan activities directly impacted the way in which Boardies engaged with the spaces on the tour. For instance, one planned destination was Posten's Funeral Home, briefly featured as an exterior location in *Clerks*, and located a short distance from the Quick Stop. However, conscious of the potential insensitivity of a large group of people taking photographs of the exterior of such an establishment, it was decided during the tour to skip this particular location, signalling Boardies' awareness of the relatively exclusive nature of their shared fan cultural experience. That the decision was made to abandon plans invokes the way the Board logo implicitly suggests there should be a barrier between fannish and non-fannish spheres (Figure 11), with Boardies on the one hand protecting any clientele who may be present, but on the other protecting the reputation and integrity of their community and fan object.

Such behaviour demonstrates the way in which on- and offline fan behaviour may be thought of as comparable. Chapter Three examined how Boardies derived their understanding of normative behaviour for the online community through cumulative experience, meaning that behaviour considered "normal" for the Board may not necessarily be suitable elsewhere online. With the decision to censor offline activity for Posten's, Boardies recognise that in this instance their normative behaviour[37] may not necessarily be acceptable – where online their actions could be contained within the confines of the Board web space itself, here their actions may intrude on others. In choosing not to visit Posten's, the symbolic boundaries of the community are maintained, meaning that even though offline meetups may be a significant irregularity in Boardie fan experience, actions in the "real world" can reaffirm the values of the online space.

Offline Activities as Semiotic Productivity

Through examining experiential contexts of practice, Section One was able to conceptualise Kevin Smith fandom according to how particular productivities are enabled and prevented. In contrast, Cornel Sandvoss discusses the way in which the physical places fandom operates are under pressure to 'accommodate the imagined symbolic content of such communities.' (2005: 58) Citing Edward Relph's notion of "placelessness" (1976), Sandvoss notes that Relph describes spaces as invoking "other-directedness" – 'places not

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[37] Posten's Funeral Home is in fact listed on "Tours Askew", a webpage pointing out places of filmic interest in Red Bank and the surrounding area. That it is hosted on the official View Askew website signals the encouragement for Smith fans to visit. http://viewaskew.com/toursaskew/other.htm

experienced in and for themselves but in reference to absent codes and symbols.' (Relph, cited in Sandvoss 2005: 58) Here Sandvoss contends that these physical spaces of fandom do not hold any inherent value; that any codes or symbols that imbue particular spaces with an aura are only created and/or understood by fans. Simply put, the fact that fannish spaces exist presents demonstrable proof of fan cultures' productivity. That particular locations were featured in the films of Kevin Smith does not automatically denote cultural significance; it is therefore apt to understand the construction of physical fannish spaces as a form of semiotic productivity.

Couldry defines such semiotic practices as 'public expressions of [fan] identity' (2000: 72), where visiting significant locations is a marker of fan cultural capital. However, despite this Couldry summarises the responses of his *Coronation Street* participants, noting that although was a sense of sociality between visiting fans, 'visitors generally experienced this *in parallel to*, rather than with, each other.' (Ibid: 75, emphasis in original) This would appear to confirm Fiske's view of the 'essentially interior' semiotic productivity (1992: 37), where although social identity can be deconstructed one is expected to do so privately.

Yet such a conception is complicated when one considers the offline experience in tandem with online. Although making meaning of the cult geographies as a solely touristic pursuit may indeed produce interior semiotic productivity, when it forms part of a larger fan sphere – where stories, photos, and experiences can be shared online with one another – this "interior" productivity can be informed and shaped by the voices of others within the fan culture. As a result, identifying and visiting cult geographies allows the

expression of fannish identity to simultaneously increase fan cultural and social capital.

By examining a prior trip I took to Red Bank in 2004, and comparing it to the 2010 trip, it is possible to identify the difference between an interior cultural geographic semiotic experience and that which can be shaped externally by a fan culture. As noted in Chapter Two, I was able to highlight my 2004 trip during my Board entrée in order to invoke a sense of fan cultural capital, as I was aware that visiting Red Bank in particular would have positive cultural connotations for Boardies. Yet the 2004 trip was a relatively insular experience, because I was in my period of lurking on the Board and thus was aware of the cultural cachet my visit would have, but was unable to express as much on a wider scale.

Figure 16: Arriving in Red Bank in 2004.

I took my 2004 trip with a friend who similarly identified as a Smith fan (but not a Boardie), and the trip was to be the main focus of our time in the US, bookended by time in New York City. Pictures from the trip demonstrate my pleasure at merely being in a location so closely associated with Smith; Figure 16 shows me posing next to the train station sign, a location which has no direct correlation to View Askew productions other than featuring the name of the town. For me, that I was in Red Bank itself was emblematic of fan pilgrimage, let alone visiting film locations. When we did visit the more notable cult geographies – the Quick Stop, Jack's Music Shoppe, the Secret Stash – we took the opportunity to take photos of one another, of film props, and to buy View Askew t-shirts, comic books, and autographed DVDs.

What is notable however is how relatively insular this fan experience was. Due to lurking on the Board, I was aware that meetups took place – particularly in Red Bank during Smith's "Vulgarthon" film festivals – and my souvenir photos seemed to highlight my relatively closed fan experience (Figure 17). Although my friend and I were able to share the experience with each other, we did only share it with each other. Our efforts to go to New Jersey were not lauded by our friends and family, unfamiliar with the significance of Red Bank to our fan cultural sphere. Subsequently, any cultural capital could not be claimed and displayed.[38] The accumulation of fan cultural capital, then, is dependent on the presence of others fans who can provide validation.

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[38] In fact, in this instance my "display" of fan activity was in a physical scrapbook, a stark contrast to the public display and exchange of photos and memories that would usually take place on the Board.

Figure 17: Alone outside the Quick Stop, March 2004.

In contrast, my 2010 tourist gaze – in the presence of other Boardies – became the search for my own "authentic" fan experience. As noted above, the activity surrounding the cult geographies in 2010 provided a sense of a private community acting in plain sight. What is notable however – in comparison to the 2004 trip – is the sense of *community* that was derived. In visiting cult geographies in greater numbers (Figure 18), and having the supportive presence of such a fan community, fan productivity was able to flourish.

The visit to the cult geographies in the presence of a number of other individuals fostered a sense of community and togetherness. As a result the sense of shared space, rituals of shared practices, and exchange of social support that contribute to a feeling of community in digital environments (Baym 2010: 86) was made similarly applicable to the physical, motivated by

the communal experience. Individually, my experience worked to stimulate my fan cultural capital, however interior. As part of a wider collective, however, my experience stimulated fan social capital through participation in a form of textual productivity, the tour group signifying the common name by which my sociality became informed (Bourdieu 1986: 51).

Figure 18: Boardies together outside the Quick Stop, August 2010.

Offline Activities as Textual Productivity

The offline communal fan experience of shared practices is most obviously apparent in more familiar behaviour: similar to my 2004 trip time was spent buying merchandise and taking photographs at each location. However, one aspect of the location tour I had not previously experienced was the shared approach to textual productivity. Where Chapter Four examined how Smith

constrained textual productivity, in an offline context it was able to thrive via Boardies' desire to emulate their favourite View Askew film moments.

For example, upon visiting the Quick Stop, I posed as the "Egg Man" character from *Clerks* – a guidance counsellor in search of the "perfect dozen" eggs who performs all manner of tests on the eggs before smashing them against the nearby door. Although not going to such lengths, I set my camera to match the black and white aesthetic of the film, and posed with an open carton of eggs (Figure 19). Buoyed by the communal atmosphere of around twenty people in the store at once, I felt able to take the time to indulge in a fannish moment – something I had felt too sheepish to do when my friend and I were the only customers present in 2004. In contrast to my earlier visit, here fellow fans went out of their way to encourage one another's productivity, and as such my tourist gaze of Red Bank became influenced by the shared communal fan experience – something I had previously not experienced.

Figure 19: Left: Walt Flanagan as the "Egg man" in *Clerks*. Right: Recreating the moment in the Quick Stop chiller section in 2010.

Similarly, outside the Quick Stop and RST Video pairs of fans queued to stand against the front wall, emulating Jay and Silent Bob (Figure 20), aping their casual demeanour. The kind of textual productivity detailed here isn't cosplay or roleplay to the level described by Theresa Winge (2006), nor is it a performance explicitly seeking Smith's approval, such as those visible in clips on the *Evening with Kevin Smith* DVDs (Soles 2008: 328) – it may more aptly be described as a 'pleasure of participating in the fiction' (Couldry 2000: 70). However, this kind of fan tribute is interesting when one considers the way in which Smith has previously tailored fans' textual productivity to his own authorial vision. Here the Boardies are not textual poachers struggling 'with and against the meanings imposed upon them by their borrowed materials' (Jenkins 1992: 33), they are adhering to the narrative and creative decisions Smith has already made. By re-presenting, rather than reinterpreting in their moments of textual productivity, the Boardies stay true to Smith's stated creative authority (Smith 2009b).

Figure 20: Above: Jay and Silent Bob outside RST Video in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*. Below: KTCV and Silent Bunny pose in a similar fashion.

Here then, offline activity allows a more explicit form of productivity not possible online. Yet returning to Fiske's definition of textual productivity reveals a significant aspect of Boardie cultural practice. Fiske notes that the key differences between producers and fans in their productivity are:

> … economic rather than ones of competence, for fans do not write or produce their texts for money; indeed, their productivity typically costs them money. … There is also a difference in circulation; because fan texts are not produced for profit, they do not need to be mass-marketed, so unlike official culture, fan culture makes no attempt to circulate its texts outside its own community. (1992: 39)

Initially Boardies' textual productivity would appear to conform to Fiske's definition. Participating in Smith's fiction was a significant economic burden for many attendees – the vast majority were not local to New Jersey and had

travelled from far afield. In addition, the photographs taken would likely not

appeal to anyone beyond the Board. However, after the meetup, the Board

thread established to organise the location tour became a portal with which to

share memories and photographs: photos like those in Figures 13, 14, and 15

became talking points and proof that one was there. As a result, although no

monetary profit is exchanged, the photos become vessels with which to collate

fan cultural and social capital. "Cashing in" in this manner became

commonplace, such as the posting of numerous versions of the same photo:

slight variations on the same Quick Stop group shot (Figure 18) were a popular

addition despite their similarity, and only served to emphasise Boardies'

respective ownership of such moments.

Offline Sociality and Communal Cultural Commodity

Similar to how Section One detailed online activity that initially centred on

Kevin Smith before branching out to accommodate Boardies' sociality, here I

identify similar patterns of behaviour occurring in an offline context. This

chapter has hitherto examined how offline activity supports notions of fan

cultural and social capital whilst maintaining Smith as the primary cultural

commodity of the community. However, the Red Bank trip made clear that a

variety of activities took place which do not necessarily prioritise Smith, giving

support to Syracuselaxfan's depiction of offline "off-topic" sociality where

Smith is not frequently discussed (Live interview, 01/08/10).

Returning to Boardie affirmation of Smith as the friendly producer,

E.l.i.a.s. notes 'I don't see Tarantino or Cameron or Bay or Ratner or

ANYONE, really, inviting their fans over for poker, or to play hockey, or to celebrate their birthday.' (Survey response, 13/05/10) Reflecting a familiar process of deferral in detailing Smith's interactive practices, what is notable about E.l.i.a.s.'s response here is the types of activities he picks out: poker, hockey, and birthday celebration are precisely the activities organized during the Red Bank meetup. Even though Smith was not directly involved in the former two events over the weekend, it is significant that Boardies arranged their social time around activities that Smith, if not introduced, then certainly popularised on the Board.

Street hockey in particular is one pastime of Smith's that has been adopted by Boardies. As a result of a self-ascribed 'huge emotional breakdown' in 2008 (Jones 2010),[39] Smith rediscovered his passion for ice hockey, and in the process a passion for player Wayne Gretzky, a man nicknamed "The Great One" who has been acknowledged as one of the sport's greatest players and ambassadors (Schwartz 1999). Following his admission of Gretzky fandom and declaration of his intention to take part in an annual street hockey tournament organised by Gretzky's father, Smith noted how Boardies began to articulate their own desire to partake in the experience:

> After learning about it, I mused about the idea of playing in the tourney, in a podcast and on the message board at my website. All of a sudden, other dudes like me – old, out-of-shape, unathletic, with more body fat than bone – started dreaming they, too, could forecheck it up the slot and slap themselves some middle-aged glory one last time...in the hometown of the Great One, no less! (Smith 2009c)

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[39] Resulting from a fear of a fierce negative critical and commercial reaction to *Zack and Miri Make a Porno*.

Subsidising teams made up of Boardies – pledging to cover 'entrance fees,

jerseys *and* goalie pads' at a personal cost of over $1000 (Smith, Board post,

18/03/09, emphasis in original) – Smith enabled Boardie participation in an

activity personally important to him, allowing an emotional engagement that is

reminiscent of the context of mutual affirmation, whereby Smith's interaction

with Boardies reinforces his role as locus of the culture, and Boardies can

assist in perpetuating Smith as the friendly producer. Reflecting on my

intention to attend the Red Bank meetup (prior to the event), Tarhook

observed:

> … if I were you I'd try to get any grant or funding or something to go
> to [the Walter Gretzky tournament in] Brantford. Meeting people at his
> Q&A will be fun and beneficial, but something like Brantford where
> board members travel to Canada to play hockey with [Kevin] is exactly
> what this board and the really invested members are about. (Survey
> response, 17/05/10)

Here Tarhook suggests that there is something particularly special about the

activity of hockey in regards to Smith-Boardie relations. In coming together to

celebrate a passion of Smith's, Boardies seemingly perpetuate their passion *for*

Smith – for Tarhook their extra commitment to sociality marks them as

particularly committed to the fan culture. Boardies' subsequent establishment

of the "View Askew Street Hockey League", a competition that allows teams

to meet and play against one another, solidified such closeness founded on a

desire to socialise with both Smith and other fans.

Figure 21: The View Askew Street Hockey League logo.

Reaffirming Smith's importance to street hockey as a fan practice, Boardies

integrated an image of character Silent Bob into VASHL logo designs (Figure

21), in addition to naming teams after View Askew-related properties.[40] Such

displays would initially suggest that offline practices re-establish Smith as the

primary cultural commodity of the culture. Aping the way mutual affirmation

functions on the Board, the establishment of the VASHL can be thought of as a

move to emulate the feelings and ideals espoused by Smith, adopting his

interests in order to demonstrate attributes he may find favourable. Once again,

this offline textual productivity adheres to Smith's creative authority; adopting

team names and iconography attributable to Smith simultaneously affirms his

status as the social, friendly producer and the productive auteur.

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[40] Teams include the View Askew Vulgarians (*Vulgar* 2000), Funployees (*Clerks II*), Leonardo
Reapers (*Clerks II*), Monroeville Zombies (*Zack and Miri Make a Porno*), LA Mings (a play
on professional team the LA Kings, in a tribute to Board webmaster Ming Chen), View Askew
Girls (or "VAG"), and Smith's team Puck U.

Yet taking this into account, holyground signals how like the online culture, offline practices have similarly evolved:

> I started playing street hockey, and then jumped at the opportunity to play against [Kevin], but this year I don't even care that I'm not going to be playing against him. I'm happy that I get to play against teams full of his fans. (Survey response, 27/05/10)

What we can see here is the way in which Smith becomes thought of as the secondary cultural commodity to the community in an offline context. After originally establishing Boardies' desire to play hockey in an aim to feed his own passion, Smith's non-participation is met with an unconcerned response, leaving Boardies to use the activity as a means of socialisation. Such a sequence of events follows the pattern of online circumstances almost identically: Smith established the Board in order to communicate with a fanbase, before the fans' process of socialising took precedence over affirmation. Much in the same way as the Board retains the View Askew name, Smith's symbolic capital – 'an image of respectability and honourability' (Bourdieu 1984: 291) – is retained and implemented as a sign with which to unite Boardies, but explicit celebration of Smith becomes secondary to sociality.

The prominence of offline *sociality* noted throughout this chapter is highlighted by Tears In Rain, who in his description of offline meetups notes how – by definition – they require an explicit emphasis on sociality in order to function:

> Sometimes some people are a little bit shy or a bit nervous or they feel left out. But with this group it's not like you have to be popular. You just need to be a little bit outspoken. And even if you're shy you're

accepted by this group cos they're the … friendliest people you'll find (Live interview, 02/08/10)

As opposed to the way in which individually users must learn patterns of sociality themselves online, Tears In Rain can act as the Funbassador in an offline context as a meetup performs an explicitly social function by definition. Online, individual motivations are not necessarily clear, suggesting that explicit guidance is not given as a form of screening. Commitment to Boardie culture is proven in an individual's learning process and understanding of contexts of history and regularity. In contrast, for offline meetups there is a need to be "outspoken" or at least willing to socialise in the first instance – offline lurking would not be a successful practice. For example, discussing attending Smith's 2006 Vulgarthon festival, FiveStatesAway notes:

> I remember sitting next to people in [my] row, recognising them [from the Board] and being like "They don't wanna meet me!" … so I didn't really say anything. And then afterwards [on the Board, discussing the event] I was like "Well the movies were great," [and other Boardies exclaimed] "What, you were there?! Where were you?!" and I was like "I was in your row…like three seats down…". [They asked] "Why didn't you say hello?!", [to which I replied] "I have no idea. … I'm just weird – no real reason!" (Live interview, 01/08/10)

Here FiveStatesAway demonstrates a sense of shame in his social awkwardness, preferring to label himself as deviant or strange for not socialising during a meetup. Such self-categorisation signals an understanding of the extent of the social function of meetups – that if you are in an offline environment with other Boardies, etiquette dictates introducing oneself. Such an understanding of "appropriate" offline behaviour therefore suggests that even though there are differing approaches to on- and offline practice, the two can be linked in their overriding prioritisation of sociality. The Boardies

expressed surprise at FiveStatesAway's offline "lurking" and lack of desire for social capital, rather than congratulating the fan cultural capital accumulated by attending a Smith event.

Such a response hints at how "Boardie" identity can be more formally conceptualised. The emphasis on fan social, rather than cultural, capital throughout Section One and this chapter signals how Smith's role in the fan culture is now more accurately described as the secondary cultural commodity. It is important to note here however that Smith does remain a cultural commodity, and that he isn't necessarily the primary factor does not wholly diminish his function to the community. His symbolic capital can be freely invoked when needed as a uniting, recognisable sign, but the primary emphasis of both on- and offline interaction is that of sociality. Ming Chen, webmaster of the Board,[41] confirmed that he felt Kevin Smith fandom was largely irrelevant to the community's continued functionality:

> The same people from the community come back [to meetups], they all become my friends, so, you know, it's like, what's more fun than seeing all your friends in one place? It's like a big party. I think a lot of people come, you know, when Kevin has a thing they come out. They don't really come out for him, it's just an excuse to come out. They just want to hang out with each other. (Live interview, 02/08/10)

Ming's description of meetups as a "party" suggests that Boardies coming together is treated as a celebration. Indeed, Tears In Rain's annual planning of vacation time around Smith-related events (Survey response, 13/05/10) further signals the jovial atmosphere that is an appealing feature of meetups for some.

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[41] Chen was hired as View Askew webmaster in 1995 after Smith saw the *Clerks* fanpage he created. In addition to running Smith's online presence he has hosted podcasts on Smith's SModcast Network, and is a cast member of AMC Television's *Comic Book Men*, a scripted reality series set in Jay and Silent Bob's Secret Stash.

While this does not discount Smith's symbolic capital, or the experiential context of mutual affirmation, it reaffirms that offline, as well as on-, Smith has become the secondary cultural commodity of the culture.

In highlighting sociality as a key factor in the way fan communities operate, Stephanie Tuszynski identifies the way in which studies of fan cultures frequently have become drawn to the relationships between fans themselves than the object of the fandom:

> What is important to remember about [online fan] groups … is that regardless of their online status, audience groups are significant examples of social activity being organized around cultural commodities. The syntax of that sentence is crucial. *The social interaction is the primary point of interest for most of the groups in the studies just listed, not the media text around which the community coalesced.* (2008: 83, emphasis in original)

It is the social activity organised around these cultural commodities that becomes a signifier for fan practices at large, and this thesis has so far demonstrated such a dynamic within the Kevin Smith fan culture. Other such studies of fandoms have allowed opportunities to discuss the way in which fans are categorised (by both themselves and others), and the labels developed help in the processes of mapping fan activity. As noted in the Introduction, some terms that have been adopted are "Xenites", "X-Philes", and "Trekkies", as well as "Browncoats" (*Firefly* fans), "Whovians" (*Doctor Who*), and "Gleeks" (*Glee*). These fan cultures are defined by the principal object of their fandom, regardless of the specificities of their activity.

Detailing how *Firefly* fans named themselves, Tanya Cochran observes how many fans make direct comparisons between the narrative struggle of the show's characters with antagonists the Alliance, and their own battles with 20th

Century Fox, citing Browncoat Luke who notes: 'It's not just a cute name because that's what they called people on the show. That's who we are. We're the people who lost, and we're the people who were brothers in arms when the cancellation came down.' (2009: 70) Luke's account of the producer-fan conflict which inspired Browncoat identity signals how the name of a fan group can be politically charged, in the use of 'metaphors of war, resistance, and insurgency [which] clearly govern the symbolic paradigm of Browncoat-ness.' (Cochran 2009: 70) Although Cochran later disputes this fannish reading (2009: 89), what is significant is how fans' own categorisation of their identity is inherently tied into collective struggle, confirming Jenkins' understanding of the formulation of fan communities as resistant to producers (1997: 507) in a very explicit manner.

Tuszynski describes the subjects of her study as not *Buffy* fans known as Bronzers, but a community called "Bronzers" who happen to be *Buffy* fans (2008: 8). Yet in making this distinction Tuszynski undermines the importance of *Buffy* as an initial source of social cohesion – in naming the virtual space the Bronze in the first place, a link to *Buffy*'s diegetic social hub is made clear regardless of how the community ultimately shaped itself. In taking their name from their preferred cyber space, Boardies create an inherent distance between their fan culture and Kevin Smith, yet as I have demonstrated, Smith still registers importance with the communal participants. It might be posited that in adopting a term which could be appropriate for practically any online forum – rather than say, "Smithies" or "Askewvians" for example – the community was assisted in being allowed to supplant Smith as the primary cultural commodity.

However, the complex nature of relations between Smith, Boardies, and how the fan culture is constructed, demonstrates how Boardie identity can be categorised as a malleable state – a process of definition and redefinition according to varied contexts (Albrechtslund 2010: 117), rather than a single non-negotiable meaning. Allowing for this, at present I would use the term "Boardie" to describe a participant in a culture which takes Kevin Smith fandom at its origins, but now encompasses a more generalised community of on- and offline social activity.

In beginning to detail some of the offline backchannelling activities of Boardies, this chapter demonstrates the difficulty in trying to conceptualise a single cohesive definition of a fan culture. The varying extents to which Boardies articulate their fandom of Smith during meetups, and the instances in which Smith's symbolic capital is invoked, signal that a fan community – with all its particular quirks, rules, and operations – should be considered a malleable, nebulous entity. Such an entity is free to morph as tastes change and as relationships develop or conclude. In the case of those discussed here, the conceptualisation of a singular "Boardie" identity of Kevin Smith fans relies on multifarious modes of both on- and offline practices, suggesting that the community's own experiential contexts of fandom are not exclusively founded in any particular format. Whilst beginning to explore the similarities and differences between on- and offline modes of operation, Chapter Six will further examine the distinction between the two and how Boardies conceptualise their community within the contrasting contexts.

Chapter Six

Social "Community"/Social "Family"

Sarah Gatson and Amanda Zweerink observe that Marie-Laurie Ryan's (1999) use of the term "virtual" seems to encompass a sense of the elusive, if not the illusory, noting that there is a general conception that 'As communication … has gone from "real" to "virtual," so community has gone from "strong" to "weak".' (2004: 41) However, the conceptualisation of Boardie community is not as black and white a concept, and is instead a fluid entity that transcends the binaries of "real" and "virtual" through its use of on- and offline backchannelling. Returning to a quote regarding Smith-Boardie communication, Tarhook states 'I think the difference is [Smith's] interaction. … And not in a typical "Q&A" setting, but real life interaction.' (Survey response, 17/05/10) In Chapter One I noted how "real" life in this context signified Smith's ability to project a genuine, knowable persona online, and such an observation signals the extent to which Boardies implement the general distinction of "real" and "virtual" that has permeated previous analyses. Here then, I examine the manner in which Boardies conceive of their offline practices in direct contrast to online. Building on the findings discussed in this section already, I will further discuss how offline backchannelling and activities impact online Boardie culture, specifically with reference to how the notions of on- and offline "community" are conceptualised, and whether "community" is an appropriate term to label the culture. Already in this thesis it has been demonstrated how CMC has become an everyday practice for Boardies. But what I shall examine here is how in opposition to the idea that

'virtual community … appears to be luring some people away from "real life"'
(Bell 2001: 181), on- and offline practice of Boardies necessarily informs the
other – there is no separation or binary opposition of what is and is not "real" –
instead, offline practice becomes another experiential context, informing on-
and offline sociality in a cyclical manner.

Conceptions of Community

As noted in the Introduction, the definitions and differing opinions of what
precisely constitutes "community" can vary. Jan Fernback argues that 'the
concept of community, online or offline, has become increasingly hollow as it
evolves into a pastiche of elements that ostensibly "signify" community,'
(2007: 53) suggesting that it is redundant to even cite the term in discussion of
particular collectives. Yet in describing the way in which online groups
categorise themselves, Nancy Baym observes the way in which use of
language can help inform conceptualisation:

> Most online groups are not so tied to geographical space, yet people
> who are involved in online groups often think of them as shared places.
> The feeling that [such places] … constitute "spaces" is integral to the
> language often used to describe the internet. (2010: 75-6)

The online shared space of the Board, conceived of as a social hub or base by
some (as seen in Chapter Three), is frequently defined by Boardies as a
community space. For example, in assessing the social function of the Board,
slithybill notes that 'I think the Board has created a stronger sense of
community and has fostered stronger friendships and relationships that will last
entire lifetimes.' (Survey response, 12/05/10) Even though the term

"community" itself may become bogged down in 'ideological baggage' (Bell and Valentine 1997: 93), the fact that Boardies choose to implement the term for themselves cannot be insignificant. As Lori Kendall notes 'Debates about the definition or usefulness of the term "community" concern the central questions of the kinds of bonds we form, and the way those bonds change as we blend our offline lives with online interactions.' (2011: 313) Regardless of how "community" is debated by scholars (Jones 1997: 27), or its status as a 'political, cultural, economic, and technical buzzword,' (Fernback 2007: 52), Boardies' use of the term to make connections between their on- and offline practices demonstrates that it is an appropriate term of categorisation to use in this context, and taking my cue from this I take a more relativist approach to identify Boardies' labelling of their own culture. Indeed, as Baym argues, a community is a community if participants imagine themselves as such (1998), and I will adhere to such a definition here.

In the previous chapter, the manner in which Boardies' sense of digital community inflected the physical was explored. Ruth, for instance, has noted that 'I think the sense of community is developed via the Board, and would be less developed without it.' (Survey response, 12/05/10) However, Ruth's belief that the sense of community would be less developed without the Board discounts the offline contexts one can consider. Boardies' initial (online) conception of community therefore made it pertinent to ask for a definition of the "View Askew fan community" during the meetup in order to assess responses within this offline context.

JordanFromJersey began by likening the structure to a school's social order, noting that the community comprised of 'everything. I mean, it's a little

bit of everything. … [T]he jocks, the preps, the geeks, the nerds. Mostly the nerds! But the jockier nerds, the preppier nerds' (Live interview, 02/08/10). Here JordanFromJersey makes no distinctions about those considered part of the community. All those that participate on the Board, regardless of any divergence of interest between different topic threads, are considered part of the wider Board community. Tellingly, these participants are all categorised in the same way: as "nerds". Rather than being used as a pejorative term (Brooker 2002: 3), here the label instead becomes a badge of honour, indicative of the shared interest in popular and subcultural activities.

Yet what is interesting about JordanFromJersey's description is that an offline social hierarchy is subsequently applied. In labelling all Board participants nerds, JordanFromJersey provides a template for seemingly homogenous Boardie activity, making clear the communal boundaries felt. But in subcategorising a scholastic social order, more intricate mores of activity are suggested. JordanFromJersey hints at sects of fan groups that may be at odds with more widely articulated conceptions of Board operation discussed in this chapter. A comparison with offline social structures is also apparent in Haar's response to the question, observing that 'Oh, it's like any kind of community, there's gonna be neighbours that don't get on, you know – "Your dog's shitting on my yard again, and your kid's got his radio too loud"' (Live interview, 31/07/10). Although Haar hints towards conflict – only briefly touched upon by others who are keen to emphasise togetherness and sociality – his definition of those in the community as "neighbours" signals an adherence to the conception of people sharing some kind of space (Baym 2010: 75-6).

The responses detailed here are notable for the way in which they conceive of the Board community in terms readily identifiable with offline structures. Whilst this may be founded in the fact all the responses came from face to face interviews during a meetup, it is significant that the offline activities invoked – a school, a neighbourhood – are used to describe both offline *and* online community, with no explicit distinction made. There is of course a distinct difference between the actual methods of on- and offline interaction. Offline meetups are only possible for those who physically inhabit the same space, and online interaction is dependent on software maintenance:

> Virtual communities require non-virtual hardware and software resources, and those resources may be controlled by one or a few members … or by persons or groups completely outside of the community … This can make virtual communities more vulnerable to disruption or dissolution than their offline counterparts. (Kendall 2011: 315)

As Kendall notes, online communities' existence within particular spaces are reliant on the whims of site owners – the temporary closure of the Board and Smith's behavioural directives as noted in Chapter Four support this notion. However, as has been apparent from Boardies' responses to notions of their community, the boundaries of the View Askew Message Board itself are not inherently necessary to maintain a sense of Boardie identity. Although producorial approval is a welcomed side effect of practicing community in an "authorised" space, the backchannelled activities of fans – online and off – suggest that here a more social definition of Board community can be said to dominate.

The predisposition towards considerations of sociality continues with Haar's admission of trepidation of making the leap from online friendships to offline. Echoing the apprehension I felt prior to the meetup, he notes:

> I'm kind of curious to see just the whole spread of people that show up, and see how they compare face-to-face versus online. Cos a lot of people, you know, they like to preach, go, "Well I'm the same here as I am in person", and then you see them in person and they either don't talk or they're total dicks. (Live interview, 31/07/10)

Haar notes the caution with which he approaches offline interaction, and the scepticism he has of others' representation of themselves. But what he chooses to criticise is notable, and evokes Tears In Rain's observation from the previous chapter that a *willingness* to socialise is important. In the context of an offline meetup, someone not talking and being shy is apparently as bad a social faux pas as being obnoxious. An understanding of appropriateness – similar to that of FiveStatesAway who was aware offline "lurking" could be perceived as irregular – therefore inflects meetup culture and community in the same way that cumulative understanding influences Board behaviour.

Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman suggest that such a social approach to notions of community categorisation implies that CMC 'has not introduced a new geography to community; it has introduced a new means of social contact with the potential to affect many aspects of personal communities.' (2002: 347) In short, despite the fact the mechanics of on- and offline interaction may differ, Boardies' repeated emphasis on communal sociality, regardless of whether it takes place over an internet connection or face to face, signals that the "real" and "virtual" spaces in which fandom and interaction thrive need not

be considered binary oppositions – one should be expected to behave in the same manner regardless of the space.

Fan "Family"

The repeated invocation of sociality as a key component of operation signals the strength with which Boardies value the interpersonal ties they share with those in their fan culture. For instance, building on his conception of meetups as a "party", Ming compares the community's Smith to Boardie commodity transition to a romantic relationship, noting that 'It's kinda, you know, when you meet your wife or girlfriend, you have something in common initially, but you stick together probably for other reasons.' (Live interview, 02/08/10) Adhering to this analogy, the "other reasons" to which Ming refers are presumably feelings of love (albeit not necessarily romantic love in this case). To refer to interpersonal relations with other Boardies in such strong terms is telling, and hints at the recurring manner in which Boardies articulate their perception of the community in a context of devotion. For example, when ruminating on meetups in relation to Smith as the secondary cultural commodity, Tears In Rain's language is revelatory in how he conceives of Boardies:

> … I mean, some of them [the other fans] are like family to me – it's
> not just community. I flew to Ireland to stay with somebody who
> I've never met before … I've gone to LA to stay with people. I'll
> go to Florida, we go all over the place with or without Kevin. ...
> (Live interview, 02/08/10)

Although Tears in Rain emphasises his high degree of social capital by referencing national and international travel in his maintenance of a social

network, the use of the term "family" appears particularly significant. By noting the strong relationship between fans as one of "family", and explicitly placing that term within a hierarchal structure above "community", Tears In Rain demonstrates how he believes Boardies maintain particularly close emotional ties. As Kendall notes 'the very term "friendship" is both vague and symbolically charged and may denote many different types of relationship' (2002: 141), and the same can be said of the term "family". What is *meant* by family is not important, it is the fact that the term is seemingly placed in a hierarchy above that of "merely" community. In the same manner, ima_dame also categorises her definition of the fan community in this way:

> The community … [is like] a family. Totally. … [W]e're a family that lives everywhere in the world and we come together for … reunions and … it's all because of Kevin – he's like the – not the matriarch but the patriarch of the family. … I think everybody pretty much gets along as a whole group. And, you know, we're like a family, and like within a family there's smaller families. So, the ones that live near each other are a little closer together, and the ones that post in the certain threads are kinda like the smaller inset of the family. (Live interview, 03/08/10)

Camille Bacon-Smith makes reference to social circles within fan cultures, noting that 'most active, "core" fans participate in the extended family structure of a "circle"' (Bacon-Smith 1992: 26). Bacon-Smith categorises a circle as groups of (a core of) two to four members, stating that a wider interest group is made up of a clusters of "circles". (1992: 26-7) Here ima_dame initially claims that the "whole group" gets along, before conceding that Boardies can be sub-categorised into different sects, much like JordanFromJersey and Haar before her. Yet where Bacon-Smith conceptualises the smaller circles as individually utopian – that 'core members of fan circles are warm and generous individuals who obtain gratification from the pleasure

of those with whom they surround themselves,' (1992: 27) ima_dame still

claims a wider utopian view, noting that the "clusters of circles" – her 'smaller

inset[s] of the family' – still work to contribute to the larger collective. Here

then, that collective is still conceptualised as "family", and all participants have

a family role to play despite any possible inter-Boardie friction. For example,

ima_dame goes on to note:

> I'm really terrible with putting Boardie names and real names together
> … It's like those cousins you don't quite know their name but you
> know they're related, you know?! It all comes back to that family thing
> for me. (Live interview, 03/08/10)

Ima_dame's reference to "the cousins whose name you don't quite know"

demonstrates that a conception of "family" is one where relations can differ.

Family in this instance doesn't necessarily indicate uniform intimacy, but a

strong relational involvement nevertheless links participants. In conceiving of

other Boardies as family, however tenuous the link, ima_dame feels a

connecting bond to all those who consider themselves part of Board culture.

Tears In Rain and ima_dame's continued invocation of a categorisation of

"family" demonstrates the level of perceived intimacy between Kevin Smith

fans regardless of fan cultural capital. The notion of fan family, seemingly

transcending that of fan "community" in terms of intimacy, demonstrates that

in this instance the general academic conception of the nature of community –

that when conceptualisation transfers from the "real" to the "virtual", "strong"

ties are thought to become "weak" (Gatson and Zweerink 2004: 41) – can be

seen to be false. Building on this notion, what is possible to see is that in

opposition to Baym's observation that '"Online" relationships turn into

"offline" ones much less often than "offline" friendships turn onto "online"

ones,' (2010: 132) for Boardies "reality" in fact paves way for the strengthening of "virtual" interpersonal ties.

For example, during the Bronze's tenure, a dedicated website was established that provided pictures and biographical information of all Bronzers who wished to participate. Gatson and Zweerink note that through the profile photos there 'thus presented much traditionally acceptable evidence that their community was real, and involved real people.' (2004: 53) In his perception of meetup culture, FiveStatesAway similarly notes the benefits of being able to put names to faces, as it lends a greater deal of contextual information to who is posting about a particular subject and why (Live interview, 01/08/10).

What is interesting however is how (as noted previously) FiveStatesAway attended a meetup before ever signing up to the Board. Attending another Red Bank Q&A show in 2005, he was struck by the number of people wearing name badges which looked like they were 'for a message board, cos it was just all these names with words and numbers … [and I thought] "these look like screen names" – I had no idea what [the Board] was.' (Ibid) Yet what prompted him to register for the Board is the manner of their behaviour during the Q&A, for 'everyone that was asking questions was funny … and they seemed like a good crowd, so … the next day … I signed up' (Ibid) The "traditionally acceptable" form of evidence touted by Gatson and Zweerink therefore seems to be similarly applicable here, but rather than photos (or seeing with one's own eyes) constituting a form of validation and proof for the community's existence, what offline interaction offers for Boardies is a chance to contextualise an individual's online activity and seek

out potential friends in a more direct manner. For instance, KTCV notes that in meeting fellow fans in person '...You get to pick up their senses of humor and speech patterns, so online communication is easier to decipher.' (Email interview, 21/12/10).

Echoing Roguewriter's testimony from Chapter Three, where he notes that off-Board communitation strengthens groups within the main community (Email interview, 22/12/10), the experiences of FiveStatesAway and KTCV suggest that the distinction between "real" and "virtual" in the practices of Kevin Smith fans appears cyclical in nature. In this cycle, depending on a participant's point of entry, online relationships lead to stronger face-to-face interpersonal ties, which can then in turn pave way for the strengthening of "virtual" communication – a product of the Kevin Smith fan culture that I would term the on- and offline sociality cycle (Figure 22).
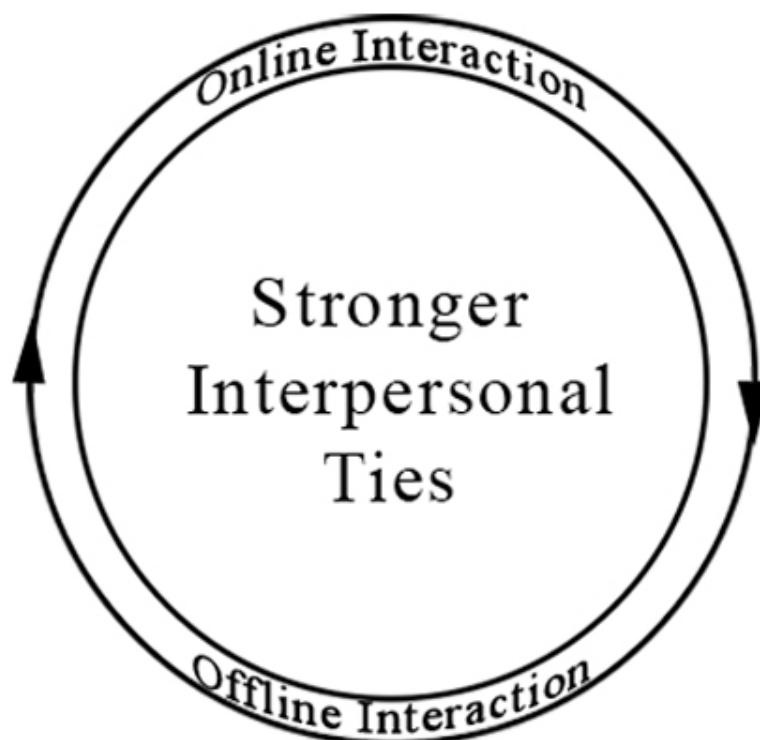
Figure 22: The On- and Offline Sociality Cycle

For example, where Roguewriter began on the Board and used this initial online communication to enhance his experience of meetups, FiveStatesAway used offline experience to strengthen his "virtual" ties. This mode of operation is summarised by Silirat in his observation of the distinction between on- and offline Boardie activity:

> … the on-Board community is not *reliant* on [off-Board activities], but it certainly *strengthens* the on-Board community. … Like any other cyber community there's a tenuous nature to it; people come and go all the time, but these events, they strengthen that bond and preserve the Board. (Silirat, live interview 2/8/2010, my emphasis)

As in the previous chapter, Boardie activity here is not a fixed component – status in the community and relations to others is dependent on the point at which one enters the culture, and continued participation in events offline and on- work to contribute to perception of the community.

Extension of Networks

In attending meetups and seemingly becoming part of the "fan family", Boardies are able to build upon their fan social capital in their interaction with others. The previous chapter touched upon this in the way capital could be cashed in via post-meetup exchange of photographs and memories. A further way in which it is possible to see the on- and offline sociality cycle in action is in the opportunities made available to Boardies during the meetup to gain further 'access to media producers and professional personnel linked with the object of fandom' (Hills 2002: 57), by having the chance to meet Smith and

others associated with his media output, and then use those offline meetings to build social capital with those persons and in public displays for other Boardies.

Such opportunities were afforded to Boardies during the New Jersey meetup at the Dublin House, an Irish pub in Red Bank. Frequently the preferred drinking destination during View Askew meetups, the Dublin House became site to a pre-Q&A party, where a private function room held host to Boardies as well as individuals who have been involved in Smith's professional and personal lives. In attendance were Jennifer Schwalbach, Bryan Johnson, and Malcolm Ingram,[42] and meeting these people (and having photographs taken with them) at a private party was a significant gain to fan social capital.

Much like the Quick Stop group photographs, memories of meeting such "professional personnel" became used online as a visible marker of fan social capital. For instance, when questioned about his meetup experience Haar went out of his way to mention meeting Schwalbach, noting that 'The biggest surprise [of the meetup] was probably Jen and how nervous she was … When I got my picture taken with her I could feel her heart racing. I was surprised she was more nervous than me.' (Email interview, 26/10/10) Haar's observation is interesting in how it ascribes Schwalbach a particular hierarchal status – she is

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[42] Schwalbach is Smith's wife and has featured in his films *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, *Jersey Girl* (2004), *Clerks II*, *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (2008), and *Red State* (2011); Johnson and Walt Flanagan (whom I met at the Secret Stash) are Smith's childhood friends who have featured in *Mallrats* (1995), *Dogma*, and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, as well as starring in their own dedicated podcast *Tell 'Em Steve-Dave* (2010-) on Smith's *SModcast* Podcast Network; Ingram is a filmmaker friend of Smith's featured on *SModcast* Network show *Blow Hard* (2010-); and Zak Knutson (whom I met during the day outside the Count Basie Theatre) is a documentary filmmaker who featured in *Clerks II*.

the only person he deems worthy to mention specifically by name[43] – whilst

simultaneously humanising her own meetup experience. Framing their

relationship as one of equality harks back to a form of mutual affirmation, and

Haar's response demonstrates how meeting "professional personnel" can

contribute further understanding and knowledge of the fan culture and

participants' respective roles and values within that culture.

My own direct experience of implementing fan social capital in the on-

and offline sociality cycle came with my chance meeting with Kevin Smith

himself. After leaving post-Q&A drinks at the Dublin House in the early hours

of the morning, myself and a small group of Boardies passed through the car

park of the Count Basie Theatre just as Smith was leaving the venue.

Reflecting the self-restraint during the location tour when the Posten's Funeral

Home leg was forgone in favour of protecting the integrity of the fan culture,

here a number of our group opted to maintain a respectful distance from Smith

owing to the fact it was early in the morning and they had met Smith before,

leaving myself and JordanFromJersey to take photo opportunities (Figure 23),

have merchandise autographed, and briefly converse.

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[43] Much like the instance noted in Chapter One, where the only named attendee for Tears In Rains' wedding was Kevin Smith.

Figure 23: Meeting Kevin Smith and building fan social capital.

Subsequently, I made an attempt to collate the social capital derived from this

meeting via online backchannels, exploiting personal social networks on

Facebook and Twitter. Much in the same way that I rearticulated Smith's

earlier online public acknowledgement of me and my work – where on Twitter

he noted 'I appreciate what you're doing … Very much so.'[44] – here I made a

point of retelling the story of our serendipitous offline meeting. In particular, I

widely disseminated the photograph I took with Smith, eager to share the

experience with others. I adopted it as my Facebook profile picture, and made

direct reference to the meeting on Twitter over a number of days:

> **@TheTomPhillips:** Best. Day. Ever. http://tweetphoto.com/36559052
> [Figure 23] (Twitter, 03/08/10)[45]
>
> **@TheTomPhillips:** @ThatKevinSmith Thanks for a cracking evening.
> It was a pleasure meeting you! (Twitter, 03/08/10)[46]

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[44] Smith was referring to the focus of my thesis on him and his fans. (Smith, Twitter, 24/05/10): https://twitter.com/ThatKevinSmith/status/14634421635
[45] Tweet located at: https://twitter.com/TheTomPhillips/statuses/20205730061
[46] Tweet located at: https://twitter.com/TheTomPhillips/statuses/20218263195

> **@TheTomPhillips:** I've changed my Twitter avatar, as according to @thatkevinsmith my previous photo made me look about 18! (Twitter, 09/08/10)[47]

The tweets sent from my account, directly referencing Smith's handle twice, demonstrate my articulation of the meeting as a form of trophy seeking (Ferris 2001: 28). Firstly the inclusion of the photograph provides evidence that the meeting occurred, with the second reaffirming this by attempting to engage Smith in "direct" conversation (Deller 2011).[48] The third makes reference to conversation Smith and I shared, providing a public call back to a privately shared moment, consciously using the platform to draw attention to my fannish experience (Marwick and boyd 2011: 9). Here my tweet makes the claim that Smith was (or at least purported to be) aware enough of my Twitter presence *before* our meeting to be able to comment on the difference between my avatar and my offline appearance. Through these tweets, I am attempting to claim fan social capital based on online interaction before our meeting, offline interaction in Red Bank, and subsequent online interaction referring back to the event. Such behavioural tactics appeared to be vindicated when Smith replied to a later tweet noting 'Thanks for being there' (Twitter 06/08/10),[49] apparently solidifying a "relationship" beyond a fleeting meeting. My offline meeting with Smith afforded me the opportunity to directly reference a shared experience when tweeting him. When the sentiment was reciprocated it allowed me to

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[47] Tweet located at: https://twitter.com/TheTomPhillips/statuses/20697550704

[48] By including Smith's Twitter username at the beginning of the tweet, the message would only appear on the timelines of those who follow both Smith and myself, rather than automatically appearing to all my followers at once.

[49] Tweet located at: https://twitter.com/ThatKevinSmith/status/20486676241 The tweet Smith directly responded to read : '@ThatKevinSmith Was great meeting you the other night. That you'd been on stage since 7 and were still accommodating at 2 is to your credit.' (Phillips, Twitter, 06/08/10, located at :https://twitter.com/TheTomPhillips/statuses/20486486338) Notably, by quoting my praise in his reply, Smith reaffirms his commitment to his friendly producer persona.

explicitly cash in social capital, and directly shaped my own fannish context as one of mutual affirmation. I don't claim to continue to share a sustained interpersonal relationship with Smith in the same manner as I do with other Boardies, but the Twitter exchange demonstrates how on- and offline experience can work together to inform interaction.

Gatson and Zweerink note that when displays of the opportunities of fan social capital were invoked in Bronzers' access to *Buffy* "VIPs", hierarchies and distinctions between Bronzers with sufficient capital were reinforced (2004: 204-5). In contrast, with Boardies no explicit division appeared to occur, and in fact the tweets of congratulations I received – from those pleased that I had had the opportunity to meet Smith – signal that my heightened capital can be viewed as a reward for my fannish behaviour. One tweet for instance, in response to my Smith photograph noted: 'LOL....THAT PIC MADE ME SMILE! Is it weird that I am proud that you DID get to meet him?' ([@username], Twitter, 03/08/10)[50] Such "pride" reflects the behaviour of those Boardies who opted to keep their distance from Smith in the Count Basie car park. Waiting patiently for our interaction with Smith to finish, the kindness and encouragement from the other Boardies present made the experience all the more special: something that was instantly shared and talked about. There was no competitive edge in terms of accruing capital – my fellow Boardies were delighted that they had played a role in allowing JordanFromJersey and I the chance to meet Smith for the first time.

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[50] Tweet located at: https://twitter.com/[username]/status/20207808712

Such instances of fannish sharing, in addition to the repeated emphasis on sociality, demonstrates that for Boardies – the Smith fan family – social capital is a commodity attainable by all, rather than exclusive to a particular few, regardless of cultural capital. Matt Hills notes that 'it is likely that fans with a very high fan cultural capital … will therefore possess [a] high level of fan social capital. But while high fan social capital is likely predicted by high fan cultural capital, this relationship need not follow.' (2002: 57). This can be seen in the actions of frick., who exemplifies that which was determined in Section One – that issues of sociality now outweigh those of practicing Kevin Smith fandom – by stating that her 'KS knowledge was not at "superfan" level' but then later noted that 'I'm on [the Board] nearly every day and talk to the international friends I have made every day on the phone/IM/facebook/etc' (Survey response, 27/06/10).

As a result, all one needs to accumulate social capital is to participate in some manner. Whether that is posting on the Board, or introducing oneself to others at a meetup, if effort is made then there is an attempt to welcome and share capital equally. For instance, influenced by the context of mutual affirmation and Smith's relationship with Boardies, Tears In Rain notes the way in which he and others, as members of the Smith fan family, attempts to welcome others into that social group:

> Really, [we're] just a lot of nice people. I mean, you get a couple of jerks every once in a while. But the majority of the people are just really friendly, good people. I mean, I'll say it over and over again but that's really how it is. … I've seen some amazing displays of generosity and compassion on The Board … [and in doing the same] what I do is pay it forward, in a sense. I really do. I do try to go out of way to make people happy, but it's the same stuff that Kevin, or Ming, who runs the message board, does for me, or Jen does for me. They've given me some of my most happy, memorable moments of my life, and in turn, why not do it

> for other people? It makes me happy that other people are happy, and I think Kevin and Jen are happy that people are happy. I'm happy to help continue what they're doing. (Live interview, 2/8/2010)

The welcoming behaviour of Boardies, as exemplified here by Tears In Rain, becomes a democratising process for the fan family, as fan social capital is extended to all, and despite this apparently only being accessible to those who attend meetups, participation is dependent on being part of the on- and offline sociality cycle, and therefore actually being a member of the Board in the first instance. TheManWhoLikesSMod notes that '... to get the full Kevin Smith experience, you should join the board and become part of the family,' (Email interview, 23/01/11), demonstrating that a conception of fan family is as accessible a commodity online as off-, and that fan social capital is a malleable process that negotiates, and therefore eradicates, the supposed binaries of "real" and "virtual".

Conclusion

This section has examined the way in which offline activity can be seen as an addition to a fannish identity, feeding in to pre-existing experiential contexts to become a wider part of cultural experience rather than being seen as a distinct and separate form of productivity. The complex negotiation between Smith and sociality as the primary cultural commodity of Boardie experience suggests that the apparent binary between "real" and "virtual" in the separation of on- and offline activity is tenuous, as it relies on a separation in the categorisation of particular activities. The (at times contradictory) nature of Boardies'

experiences demonstrates that to make such clear-cut classifications is ill advised.

For instance, this section has demonstrated the way in which offline fannish productivity reflects an adhesion to Smith' producorial authority, and done so for the accumulation of fan capital. In addition, the kinds of places chosen for meetups – the Red Bank case study used here, or various Q&As or film sets as noted in Boardies' responses – signal a preoccupation with Smith and View Askew. As Cornel Sandvoss notes, offline fannish spaces 'accommodate the imagined symbolic content of such communities,' (2005: 58) meaning there is no inherent value in particular cult geographies, and their particular "specialness" is attributed only by those fans who can relate such spaces to their own culture. Finally, my own experiences with the accumulation of fan social capital, by seeking out meetings with Smith and others associated with his professional and personal lives, makes clear the value that such "prize winning" still has.

Yet conversely, there are instances where – much like on the Board itself – sociality remains a priority. Focussing on this, I reached a tentative definition for the term "Boardie", which described a participant in a culture which takes Kevin Smith fandom at its origins, but now encompasses a more generalised community of on- and offline social activity. The conception of the on- and offline sociality cycle makes clear the way in which backchannelling can strengthen interpersonal ties, and common experience – history as a semiotic resource – need not rely on content related to the original primary cultural commodity in order to subsequently inform the fan culture. In their

discussion of inter-Bronzer on- and offline relations Gatson and Zweerink

note:

> Although strong and tightly knit, these developed and extended
> networks were at the same time fragile. In some ways, the intensity and
> speed of developing extensive networks through fandom on the Internet
> can stumble over the attempt to move them to the face-to-face realm. It
> is unclear whether personalities that mesh over online communications
> will translate well into offline contact. Personalities of course shift and
> clash for various reasons, including jockeying for position where
> members have significantly differential access to commonly valued
> social goods (popularity, intimate friendship, and more tangible
> resources such as access to jobs). The commonality developed over a
> single realm of popular culture may not extend beyond that area.
> However, the ability to multiply manage dense *and* superficial
> communications and connections with several people at once in fairly
> obscured ways – such as the nested network interactions we described
> above – can be far harder to manage in the face-to-face realm. (2004:
> 84)

Although this section has already made clear the separation between on- and

offline sociality has been a slight concern for Boardies, but the potential for

outright conflict does not cause anxiety. Yet Gatson and Zweerink's work is

useful to make a comparison to the testimony from Boardies used throughout.

What is particularly notable in this section is the manner of inclusiveness

perpetuated by Boardies. The accounts of those cited reflect notions of wanting

to fit in: exclusivity is not explicitly mentioned, and ideas of sharing and fun

are those most hinted at. The move to exclusivity, or those fans that perhaps

may not find a meetup particularly desirable, is examined in the following

section. What is useful to note at this point however, is that the positivity of

Boardies reflects a fan experience that welcomes the opportunity to make use

of backchannels, and is keen to reward those who do in a democratic process of

dissemination of fan social capital.

Section Three

Fan Taxonomies

The Introduction to this thesis detailed the different ways in which fandom has been conceptualised in prior scholarship. Following this, Sections One and Two have presented an image of "Kevin Smith fandom", examining how the appreciation of Smith as a text has functioned in various contexts of fan productivities and communal identity. Chapters One to Six have presented a case study that can contribute to knowledge and understanding of fan cultures, producer-fan relations, and concepts of community. However, the research participants detailed here represent a particular group of a particular group of a particular group – that is to say: consenting respondents of message board users that represent the "official" contingent of Kevin Smith fans. In summative terms, then, this thesis has thus far presented a very specific view of fandom and fan practice in order to engage with the field of fan studies literature. Whilst this is not necessarily a detrimental occurrence, it does signal that methodologically there is an "unstudied" contingent of fans – those that become the subject of academic analysis are only those that are "visible" or who consent to their inclusion.

To return to Cornel Sandvoss' definition that I appropriated for this study, fandom is the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given "text" (2005: 8), and what is notable – particularly in relation to the work presented here so far – is how this definition omits reference to either

individual or communal practice. My thesis has largely examined Kevin Smith

fandom within a context of community and how that inflects fan practices, but

as Sandvoss demonstrates fandom can be equally conceived as an individual

process:

> … many viewers and readers who do not actively participate in fan
> communities and their textual productivity nevertheless derive a
> distinct sense of self and social identity from their fan consumption …
> The particular challenge, then, is to explain the ambiguous relationship
> between the consumptive patterns of fans and non-fans. (2005: 30)

Sandvoss claims that fans separate from a fandom community still operate

within their own contexts of operation. Yet finding these fans for use in

empirical study becomes an issue. Where a space such as the Board more

obviously lends its structure to seeking out and recruiting research participants,

the struggles with finding "individual" fans lends to them a label of exclusion.

The aim of this section then, is to examine these "excluded" fans, exploring

their motivations for fan engagement and practices, and how non-Board fans

are categorised by Boardies.

The broad category of Kevin Smith fans – whether Boardies or not –

can be initially thought of as a taxonomic collective, 'an entity of serialized, in

principle unrelated individuals who form a group solely because each member

has a characteristic … that is like that of each other member.' (Ang 1991: 33)

But as I have already demonstrated, Boardies conceive of their community as

distinctly different – "Boardie" by definition identifies a particular type of

participation – and so the conception of "Kevin Smith fandom" as an

overriding taxonomic collective is therefore problematic. As Ien Ang notes 'the

idiosyncrasies of the individual people making up an audience, as well as the

specific interrelations between these people, do not matter: audience as taxonomic collective is in principle a term of amassment' (1991: 35). Already this thesis has shown a disregard for such a proposal – the specific relationship dynamics and practices of the research participants has been key to conceptualising Boardie identity. However, instead of attempting to label and categorise a holistic taxonomy of Kevin Smith fandom, what can be proposed is to at least consider the presence of other "individual" fans within the context of this study. What this section will provide, then, is an exploration into fan practices of those not considered to be Boardies. Whereas Natasha Whiteman makes reference to the "imagined other" of an audience in her study of *Silent Hill* fans (2009: 403), here this chapter can demonstrate this supposed "other" in practice.

The choice to interrogate "individual" fandom poses a practical difficulty. That is, if the fans are not a part of the group of study, how is one supposed to access them? Part of the issue is asking what is at stake here – if a fan is not part of the primary subject of study, why bother even seeking them out? I believe the answer lies in using the data to draw conclusions about the primary site of study through its relative difference. In the case of Kevin Smith fans, charting those who practice a form of fandom away from the Board – how and why – can help to form a better-rounded view of Boardie practice, and the contexts in which they operate. I do not believe the idea of access to the excluded audience is one that can be solved universally. Although – as will be seen below – I was a fortunate beneficiary of circumstance in regards to my research, the same happenstance technique may not be appropriate for another study. So although this section cannot suggest ways in which excluded fans can

be reached, it will demonstrate that reaching those fans in the first place does

warrant consideration.

Chapter Seven

Binaries and Hierarchies of Fan Activity

Sections One and Two of this thesis have looked at the very inclusive nature of the Boardies and their community, taking into account the ways in which the Board can be seen as an online home, how others may be thought of as a surrogate family, and how affection for Kevin Smith has at times been symbolically reduced by the community. However, in studies that deal with fan communities there can be a temptation to overstate the utopian properties of fan interaction. As Nancy Baym observes, 'The questions around relationships and new media cannot be answered with utopian or dystopian oversimplifications, nor can they be understood as direct consequences either of technology or of the people who use it.' (2010: 148). In a more practical sense, Stacy Horn notes that to some the virtual utopia 'means instant friendship, automatic intimacy with all – you can go anywhere you like and all doors will open to you and everyone there will accept you and we'll all get along with everyone else.' (1998: 229) The extent to which the Board and Kevin Smith fan culture can be representative of such utopia will be explored in this chapter.

Section One has previously alluded to the fact that at times tensions can be apparent between Boardies, with knowledge of Board experiential contexts key to integration in the fan community. However, with Section Two demonstrating that fans' conceptualisation of community and "family" seemingly goes beyond the online confines of the Board, it is apt at this

moment to examine where the fans categorise the boundaries of their community. Asking research participants whether they felt that *all* online Smith fans were included in the "community" as they saw it, the prevailing response seemed to indicate that there was in fact a difference by those considered Boardies and those labelled as "regular fans". Rocco, for example, made the distinction between Smith fans and those who are 'more than just a fan of Kev's stuff.' (Email interview, 20/12/10).

Rocco's hierarchal categorisation of Smith fans is telling in what it reveals about attitudes to articulation of fandom and what it means to be a Boardie. Making the distinction between "fans" and "more than fans", Rocco is applying his own criteria for how those within the community should be defined. Reminiscent of Sandvoss' view that fandom is defined by quantifiable patterns of consumption (2005: 7), for Rocco the level of one's fandom is a measurable artefact visible through participatory practices, for he notes 'Where one is simply saying they are a fan, the other is going to great lengths to not only prove their fandom, but talk with other likeminded folks.' (Email interview, 20/12/10) Rocco's conceptualisation of "more thans" is solely dependent on their own efforts to integrate themselves into the community – recalling the way in which Boardies must learn the contexts of Board operation in order to make themselves known to the wider community. Similarly, attending meetups and making oneself known to an offline contingent would appear to conform to Rocco's notion of "going to great lengths".

As noted in Chapter Three however, "going to great lengths" to prove ones "rabid" fandom can be interpreted as a paradoxical custom where Kevin Smith becomes the secondary cultural commodity. Here then, the act of *talk*

that Rocco highlights becomes the important defining characteristic of a "more

than". Such categorisation reinforces my analysis from Section One, which

suggests that enunciativity is a strong tool for socialisation on the Board,

invoking both social and cultural capital for participants. In opposition to

Rebecca Williams' observation that 'Fan cultural and discursive power comes

from having intimate and detailed knowledge [about the subject of fandom],'

(2004: para.[6]) here once again it is apparent that fan cultural capital is not

necessarily valued, rather what is valued is the ability and desire to simply

articulate it (whatever its status) to a wider collective. As noted in Section

Two, participation is valued – Rocco's categorisation of the boundaries of

community reiterates the suggestion that online interaction can be welcome to

all, but only if one is willing to make the effort to take part in the first place.

The perception that choosing to talk to other fans, or actively seek out a

wider community is reflected in Ruth's suggestion of a hierarchal structure

even amongst Boardies themselves, where she reflects that not making an

effort to participate is a result of "laziness":

> Personally I think there's a certain amount of laziness in the "typical"
> Kevin Smith fan. It's not uncommon for people to sign up for the Board
> and confess to years of fandom, but [claim that] "I couldn't be bothered
> signing up to the Board". (Email interview, 21/12/10)

Ruth's use of the term "laziness" is striking. With its negative connotations of

inaction, "laziness" adds to conceptual taxonomies of fandom that can be

mapped through Rocco and Ruth's responses. But where Rocco's responses

shape more diplomatic binaries of "Fan/More Than a Fan" and "Non-

participatory/Participatory", Ruth constructs more provocative oppositions of

"Typical/Atypical" and "Lazy/Active". The characterisation of the "typical"

Smith fan (in contrast to the atypical Boardies) reemphasises the hierarchal boundary between "fans" and "more thans", and calls into question the holistic depiction of Boardie identity that has been examined thus far.

In contrast to the way in which Rocco respectively classifies Boardies and non-Boardies, the oppositions Ruth presents are done so under the umbrella categorisation of on-Board activity: the "lazy" fans who initially "couldn't be bothered" to register for the Board have done so, but are still spoken of with negative connotations. Andrea MacDonald claims that 'Part and parcel of fans' social construction of fandom are notions of equality, tolerance, and community,' yet goes on to identify a set of fan hierarchies (1998: 136-8), signalling that even within supposedly utopian communities tension can exist. Ruth's framing of "typical" activity on the Board makes clear that simply posting on the View Askew Message Board does not make one a Boardie, and that entrée to the community is not as simple a process as posting to a topic thread.

Otherwise conceived as a form of fan capital, for Ruth this hierarchal distinction makes clear that being part of the Boardie community is reliant on being aware of the experiential contexts which shape current Board operation. Ruth's conceptualisation of the "lazy" fan who confesses to "years" of fandom suggests that there is a contingent who joins the Board without an understanding of the Board's primary function as a portal for socialisation with other Boardies. As a result, it is unsurprising that entrées with an emphasis on *Smith* fan capital, and a casual attitude to *Boardie* capital, can receive a frosty response.

Rocco and Ruth's responses again suggest that there is an apparent ideal for a communal utopia, but it is knowable only to those "bothered" to find out. In not wanting to articulate or share fandom with others, one can apparently be categorised as a "fan" who does not treat their affection for their fan object as seriously as others. For Ruth, the "typical" Kevin Smith fan is one who does not conceive of the Board itself as an object for reverence in the first place, and demonstrates that her perception of fans' laziness is an unattractive trait – if a fan is happy not to be part of the atypical sect, then they are apparently not worth interacting with. What is clear from these two responses is that there is a certain tension between Boardies and other Smith fans, with the attitudes of Boardies seemingly exclusionary. This harks back to Chapter Two's discussion of history as a semiotic resource, and as previously noted it is clear that the processes of Boardies having to individually learn the contexts of operation maintains a form of screening process – that if one posts to the Board and understands the context of their environment, they warrant interaction.

However, assumptive conclusions about a sect of fans are not consistent with the methodological stance I have employed thus far. Making theoretical connections without the support of qualitative enquiry would not be an acceptable research practice with the primary focus of study here, so I believe the approach should be similarly questioned when discursive conclusions about "typical" fans are posited. Although more generally this should not affect my methodological schema – the focus of study remains the same – if I am to use the conception of another type of audience to draw conclusions then I believe the same rigorous methodological thought processes should be interrogated. However, whilst I can make this ethical statement confidently in a theoretical

manner, in practical terms it poses a more pressing dilemma – how does the researcher attract the attention of those who are non-participatory, and how can these non-participants be categorised?

Leora Hadas and Limor Shifman have noted the way in which scholarship has previously engaged with the categorisation of "Othered" fans and inter-fan relations, citing the work of Jancovich and Hunt (2004), Hadas (2009), and Williams (2011b) which charts fannish disputes across a number of various fan groups, but feature a commonality in a concern for "unruliness" (2012: 11). Presenting examples specific to *Doctor Who* fandom, they observe that the multiplicitous fan groups 'are all seen by their rival communities as "fandom out of place" and out of bounds, and as such deeply problematic.' (Ibid) Such an observation details how subjectivity can inflect attitudes towards others within the broader fan taxonomy. Yet fan awareness of others within their own cultural sphere is to be expected, and when transferring discussion of different points of fandom to academic analysis, evidence of various communal (and individual) boundaries can be difficult to chart.

A more popular academic practice concerning oppositions to "traditional" "knowable" fandom are studies of instances of non- or anti-fans – those who actively register their disdain or indifference to a text (Gray 2005; Alters 2007; Pinkowitz 2011). Here, audiences are participatory according to their own agendas, framed in response to the fan practices of another group. As Jonathan Gray notes, 'Often with increasing organization, and contributing to campaigns or groundswells that sometimes dwarf or rival their fan counterparts, antifans … are as much a presence in contemporary society as are fans' (2005: 840-1). Yet whilst Gray notes that studies of anti-fandom are

'fleeting and few' (2005: 841), the existence of such audiences can still be methodologically registered with ease: Jacqueline M. Pinkowitz's study of *Twilight* anti-fans (2011), for example, takes as its case study the main webspace of the "Anti-Twilight Movement". Using screen grabs of certain portions of the website, Pinkowitz is able to present an overview of the manifesto of *Twilight* anti-fandom, and present a construction of the anti-fan culture in opposition to the fan culture. In contrast, the population of "typical fans" is an unknowable and intangible audience conception, for these are the audiences that apparently have no chartable feelings for either pole of a particular fan culture. When discussing the historical conceptualisation of the anti-fan, Gray notes that:

> Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) offered a taxonomy of audiences, ranging from the casual consumer, to the progressively more involved, active, and productive fan, cultist, enthusiast, and petty producer. Abercrombie and Longhurst's insistence on examining how audiences act and perform identity, initiating and constructing their identity through audience behavior as much as simply reacting to a text, represents a helpful sophistication of earlier stimulus-response models. However, and particularly if we shift to viewing audiencehood as performative, not purely receptive, the antifan is left conspicuously absent from their schema. (2005: 842)

If one follows Gray's lead of shifting to view audiencehood as performative then Abercrombie and Longhurst's taxonomic description of audiencehood similarly omits the fan who chooses not to participate in a manner recognised as appropriate by a particular community, suggesting that there is a prevalence in scholarship for studying that which is "knowable". In contrast, this chapter attempts to unpack that which has traditionally been "unknowable".

The "unknowable", "excluded" fan is of course only excluded in relation to something else. Just because a fan may be excluded from a

particular aspect of fan culture does not mean that they do not conform to any of the other categorisations that Abercrombie and Longhurst propose. The "lazy" Smith fans as described by Ruth, for example, are still attempting to articulate their fandom to a wider community, but are not recognised as "Boardies" because of the different experiential contexts surrounding their attempts at communication. Similarly, any particular fan study will necessarily "exclude" some because of the parameters the author sets for themselves (Crawford 2012: 103). To remedy this, through presenting case studies of such fans the remainder of this chapter provides a further analysis of Boardies as made possible through the responses of those excluded to that particular fan community. Furthermore, this chapter seeks to examine how the excluded audience element categorises their role in the fan hierarchy, and to what extent they feel "othered" in the manner that Rocco and Ruth claim the non-Boardies are.

Feelings of Inclusion and Exclusion

During the Red Bank meetup, the processes of socialisation I personally experienced began to skew my classification of my own Boardie identity in relation to other Kevin Smith fan categories. As noted in the Introduction, I had a very specific (and ethical) duty to be seen as a netnographer within the fan community, inflecting my research process with professional academic authority so to inform participants and non-participants alike to my presence. Indeed, I had been clear that one of my goals was to make personal connections and make a meaningful contribution to the collective, but the

nature of my research warranted my monitoring proceedings for anything that might make a significant contribution to my thesis. With this in mind, it was also necessary to be welcoming of those who may not have obvious fan social or cultural capital – moving away from my initial conception of "valued" Boardies (as seen in Chapter Two) and instead embracing the contribution from all who were willing to participate.

One such participant was Darth Predator who, seeing my study advertised on official Smith news resource newsaskew.com,[51] decided as a result to register for the Board. Darth Predator's survey responses are notable, as despite the questions being aimed at practising Boardies exclusively, they reflect the opinions of someone who has yet to actively contribute to the explicit boundaries of the fannish space. Considering Darth Predator's actions in relation to Baym's conception of community (2010: 86), one can question whether a lurking (or non-participating) fan can be considered part of a wider community – if there isn't a reciprocation of shared space, practices, or support, can a sense of community be derived? Giving his view on the role the Board plays in housing a particular fan community, Darth Predator notes:

> Since I have yet to become a posting member I truthfully cannot say but I honestly feel that [the concept of the "View Askew community" isn't dependent on the Board]. People of certain passions always find a way to connect with others of the same ilk. I remember my first time with a Smith film and from that point on I have been a fan and have searched

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[51] The newsaskew post read: 'Want to be a part of an interesting research project? A poster at the View Askew WWWboard is a PhD Researcher looking into the culture of Kevin Smith. Check out his post which delivers further details on his study. To be a part of it, fill out his preliminary questionnaire which will only take around 15 minutes of your time. In addition to this study, he's also hoping to do some sort of presentation in Red Bank this August to coincide with Kevin's appearance there. The entire idea is to show what a unique, vibrant fan community that Kevin has acquired over the years. Cool stuff. Be a part of it!' (http://www.newsaskew.com/view-askew-newsbites-2048, 14/05/10)

out others in some form or fashion or tried to turn others on to the greatness of the films. (Survey response, 15/05/10)

Darth Predator's response signals that although he hasn't engaged with any particular online contingent of Smith fans, he has been engaging in practices that contribute to a feeling of belonging to a community. This is not to say that he is engaging the same community as Boardies, but the feeling of belonging is subjective. By not participating on the Board up until this point, he has not been told that he *is not* part of the community, and conversely hasn't been confirmed that he is. As a result, when Darth Predator goes on to state that 'View Askew and more importantly Kevin Smith is a banner which all walks of life unite under in pride without having to agree upon all circumstances,' (Survey response, 15/05/10) one should not negate his opinion simply because it is not contextualised as part of a wider, tangible fan collective.

In discussing Bourdieu's conception of class in reference to fannish tastes, Matt Hills criticises Bourdieu's interpretation, noting that there is an assumption of 'the legitimacy of a fixed and monolithically legitimate "cultural capital", rather than considering how "cultural capital" may, at any single moment of culture-in-process, remain variously fragmented, internally inconsistent and struggled over.' (2002: 48) Where the rest of this thesis charts the more easily collated and examined mores of Boardie culture, oftentimes reflecting the shared experience of a number of participants, here Darth Predator demonstrates his own personal experience of Kevin Smith fandom. Uninformed and unencumbered by the social contexts of other Boardies, Darth Predator is able to take a more utopian view on the processes of fan

community, demonstrating the difference in which fans of varying

communities can value varying fan cultural capitals.

However, in opposition to Darth Predator's utopian conception of Board

practices, Boardies appear to maintain their exclusivity in fostering a sense of

community. Dianae for instance reflects that which has been articulated

previously by noting that if non-Board Smith fans 'don't share their fandom

with others of like mind I don't see them as part of the community.' (Email

interview, 22/12/10) Similarly, Ruth notes:

> To me, yeah, I think the VA community is more the Board group than anything outside of that. I'm not saying that the people that aren't on the Board are lesser fans or anything, because I have no doubt they probably buy as much merch and whatever as Boardies, but the Board community is a little more beyond being a fan of Kevin and his body of work, I guess, it's a fan of the community that developed from the web board. (Email interview, 22/12/10)

The community referred to here by Ruth can be identified as that which has

been discussed throughout this thesis – the Boardie community that through

experiential contexts of history and regularity has supplanted Smith as the

primary cultural commodity in order to prioritise the cultivation of their social

network. Yet whilst Darth Predator is enthused about the possibilities of on-

Board interaction, noting that 'Even if I don't agree with everyone … I will

still find people of like mind even in disagreement on these forums,' (Survey

response, 15/05/10) feelings of hostility between Boardies and non-Boardies

are still readily apparent. Ruth discusses her experience of the relations

between Boardies and non-Boardies during a meetup:

> I went to [the *Evening with Kevin Smith 2: Evening Harder* DVD premiere at] Cinespace in 2006 [and] there were a lot of fans that identified themselves as "Myspace fans" that got very irritated at

> Boardies standing in line together, blocking the sidewalk, and grabbing friends out of line to bring them up the front. … A few of the non Board people joined the Board after the event just to complain about how rude Boardies are, and how it made the event so difficult for them. (Email interview, 22/12/2010)

Ruth's comments demonstrate how the insularity of Boardie culture can be off-putting to outsiders. Despite justifying Boardies' behaviour by noting that 'tickets had been purchased … in group lots, tables arranged, etc,' (Email interview, 21/12/10) Ruth hints at a possible reason why fans may not be particularly bothered to enter a community that is seemingly difficult to infiltrate.

I was able to experience such a dynamic first-hand during my time in Red Bank for the Boardie meetup, where I noticeably felt my attitude change towards those not identifiable or recognisable as Boardies. Being part of an organised collective on the location tour and in attendance at a hockey game, I suddenly felt dismissive of those who were not part of the Boardie group, feeling perhaps that my newfound rush of social capital was under threat. Because Smith's Q&A was expected to fill the 1500-strong capacity of the Count Basie Theatre, Red Bank was occupied by multitudes of different taxonomies of fans (the "casuals" and the "more involved" Boardies as described by TheManWhoLikesSMod [Email interview, 23/01/11]). As a result, I felt protective of my newfound Boardie/fan family status that my offline backchannelling had brought me, and felt resentful of the potential for non-Boardies to achieve similar status without having taken the opportunity to learn the specific mores of the community beforehand. Gatson and Zweerink note that for Bronzers, there was a distinct 'importance of the face-to-face aspect of this community, as well as its limiting nature ... to highlight who was

a "real" Bronzer.' (2004: 65). Much with myself and the Boardies, engagement in a face-to-face offline meetup became a means of authorising oneself according to "authentic" (Hills 2002: 148) Boardie criteria, who is able to collect on the fan social capital that being present allows, and enter into the on- and offline sociality cycle.

Although selfish, particularly in contrast to the meetup attitudes of Boardies such as Tears In Rain and Syracuselaxfan, my behaviour makes evident that a tension between differing groups of fans can exist. Ruth goes on to note that such tension can be apparent from both sides, however. Similar to the tension identified in Chapter Four between Boardies and Smith's Twitter followers, in practice when more than one fan group vies for Smith's attention outright hostility can arise:

> The "us vs them" behaviour continued inside, as Jen [Schwalbach] was sitting with Boardies on the balcony of the venue, and by all accounts the group talked so loud that it ruined the show for people outside the group. One lady screamed at Jen to shut up (oh dear). I've seen it at other events as well, because as we know each other Boardies tend to gravitate towards each other. I can see that it would make people that aren't on the Board uncomfortable to encounter the Board group at events. (Email interview, 22/12/10)

In contrast to the experiences of FiveStatesAway in Chapter Five – where he noted that his non-participation during a meetup was a result of social anxiety – here Ruth demonstrates that non-participation (or exclusion) can be attributed to insularity of Boardies. The attendees' concern with talking to one another, rather than lend their attention to Smith onstage, makes clear the meetup's emphasis on Boardie sociality. And it is here, where there is a clash of respective groups' attention to their own primary cultural commodity, that conflict arises.

This conflict may also be representative of the differing attitudes towards fan capital: the democratisation of capital by Boardies means that they are comfortable in treating a Smith Q&A as a regular social event.[52] In contrast, other fan groups may see it as a chance to accrue fan cultural and social capital, and the disruption by others can impinge that process. As a result it is possible to conceptualise the networks of value (Hills 2002: 49) that shape models of fandom for Boardies and non-Boardies. As TheManWhoLikesSMod notes, 'Anybody who isn't involved with the Board has the potential to miss out on some fun times'. (Email interview, 23/01/11) However, as the tension between Boardies and non-Boardies demonstrates, what constitutes such fun is dependent on the fan taxonomy one is part of.

Anti-Social Fandom

One user who attempted to participate in such (Board mandated) "fun times" was Speedy. Speedy is one research participant who has held a negative view of Boardies and the practice of Board fan culture as a result of a negative response to her participation on the Board, noting 'in 2006 I joined the View Askew Board and was promptly driven off … People can be assholes, especially when they are able to remain basically anonymous … I saw a whole lot of bad attitudes towards any new person, for any reason.' (Email interview,

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[52] What is interesting to note, is that in contrast to the way in which Chapter Three details the shift in Smith being perceived as the secondary cultural commodity as a result of a context of Regularity, live Q&A events are quite the opposite of a regular occurrence. That the social construct of the Board is so easily transferred to offline activity signals the strength of the experiential context of Regularity and CMC.

21/12/10).[53]

Pointing out some of the shortcomings of a utopian research outlook, Speedy offers another perspective on the exclusionary Board behaviour which Ruth hints at. In contrast to the previous sections, where Boardies' responses emphasised sociality and played down conflict, Speedy makes the case that *all* Kevin Smith fans should be included in categorisations of the fan community, with the boundaries of the fandom not subject to the parameters of the Board (or indeed, any subsequent backchannels). Noting that 'some [fans] are uninterested in social networking such as message boards and Twitter' (Email interview, 21/12/10), Speedy's view of the indifferent online practices of some is a stark contrast to Ruth's perception of laziness. Where Ruth labels a fan practice as negative and lacking effort, Speedy sees something that – through experience – simply does not appeal. Here then, it is possible to chart a further addition to the fan-conceptualised Kevin Smith fan binaries, where an additional category of Uninterested in CMC/Interested in CMC can be included. Such a binary opposition again reflects Boardies' prioritisation of fan social capital over fan cultural capital, reiterating their concept of community as one which requires participation.

Yet Speedy goes on to question my own conceptualisation of "community" in my line of questioning. In opposition to my findings in Chapter Six, where I note that the on- and offline sociality cycle contributes to a sense of community (and family) with the Board as a integral hub, Speedy notes that 'Community, in my [opinion], has nothing to do with the Board. My

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[53] Speedy participated in the study as a result of following me on Twitter and reading about my research.

husband has been a huge Kevin Smith fan for the entire 15 years. He has never

and will never go on the View Askew Message Board. Is he not part of the

community?' (Ibid) For Speedy the idea of an oppositional binary placing the

communal in contrast with the private is non-existent. In Section Two I stated

that as a result of fan meetups fan social capital is extended to all, yet

participation is dependent on being part of the on- and offline sociality cycle,

and therefore actually being a member of the Board in the first instance. Yet in

contrast to this statement, Speedy – whose practices, like those of Darth

Predator, would be categorised as non-participatory and "lazy" by Rocco and

Ruth – actually holds a more utopian viewpoint of the fan community than her

"excluded" status would seemingly warrant.

Speedy's defensive question about her husband's community status

relies on the (already noted) subjective nature of the term "community". In

providing her own definition, she notes:

> I would say a community is a group of people who are united with a
> common goal, purpose, or interest. In this case....Kevin Smith fans. …
> A lack of communication on their part (either online or in person) has
> nothing to do with their inclusion (or if you rather, exclusion) in said
> community. (Ibid)

Speedy directly interrogates the beliefs of Rocco and Ruth, rejecting the notion

that participation is conducive to community and a particular level of fandom.

By stating that one's inclusion or exclusion in a community is *not* dependent

on communication, Speedy contradicts a perhaps more popular view held by

David Bell and Gill Valentine, who note that "community" is a word that is

'About belonging and exclusion, about "us" and "them".' (1997: 93) Speedy

here seems to suggest that there is no "us" and "them" in her conceptualisation

of what a community actually is – if one identifies as a Kevin Smith fan, then they should automatically be considered part of the fan community.

Speedy's articulation of her fandom demonstrates that individual context, rather than collective experience, is a significant factor in the construction of her fan identity. Lucy Bennett demonstrates that normative behaviour in an online community is not a given but is governed through strategies employed by the community's hierarchy (2011), yet the "excluded" fans – outside the parameters of any particular fan sphere – are not bound by any explicit behavioural directives. This is not to say that Boardies are necessarily bound by discourses of behaviour deemed "suitable", but non-Boardies' relative freedom to articulate Kevin Smith fan culture according to their own criteria, demonstrates the more rigid structures within which Boardies operate. In charting divergent fan factions, Derek Johnson notes that '[a]lternative positions … must somehow be silenced so that divergent interests within a community can be unified as hegemonic interpretative consensus' (2007: 287). Speedy's opinions demonstrate the way in which someone removed from a community can shape their own interpretive framework. In contrast, Boardies largely conform to a similar fan cultural position, demonstrating a categorisation of their own fan culture in terms relative to other Kevin Smith fans.

Speedy's testimony therefore makes clear that a distinction may be drawn between the Board community and the Kevin Smith fan community. She is quick to establish that neither she nor her husband have any particularly strong ties to the Board, but still maintains membership to a wider collective. By avoiding distinctions of "us" and "them" in one instance, but then

reinforcing divisions in the next, Speedy makes clear that she identifies that other Smith fans exist, but chooses not to recognise more formal organisation. In shunning the official sanctuary of the Board – and with it a context of acquiescence to Smith's producorial power – Speedy practices Smith fandom on her own terms. These terms negate the need for fan social capital, therefore proving antithetical to the Boardie experience. Such a revelation demonstrates that although Boardies – ostensibly Kevin Smith fans – act according to a particular set of criteria, "Kevin Smith Fans" seemingly operate in varying ways.

"Casual" Fandom

The experiences of Speedy and Darth Predator demonstrate that participating in Boardie activities does not necessarily convert one from a Kevin Smith fan into a Boardie: participating with an understanding of supporting (often social) contexts seems to be the key difference to inheriting such an identity. Yet this phenomenon is not exclusive to online productivities, and reminiscent of Speedy's non-interest in CMC it is possible to chart Smith fans who are similarly uninterested in offline backchannelling. As noted above, attending an offline event would appear to conform to a notion of "going to great lengths", coding it as an activity for an "atypical", "active" fan, yet here I discuss the actions of a Smith fan who categorises himself as a 'casual observer' to such practices (Bryan, live interview, 02/08/10).

Keith Johnston mentions "casual" fandom in passing in his discussion of fan dissection and analysis of film trailers, noting 'film companies … add in

more images and increase the pitch of editing to a point where the casual

viewer might miss a piece of information.' (2008: 148) Paul Booth claims

Johnston's work shows there is an "academic" sensibility in fan practices

because of the effort required to research, compile, and examine fan texts and

supplementary material (2010b: 112). Yet Johnston's invocation of the term

"casual", and Booth's subsequent lauding of the forensic nature of fans, places

"casual" user engagement in opposition to fandom. As this chapter has

demonstrated thus far, those who label themselves fans do not necessarily

conform to a particular type of behaviour, and as Cornel Sandvoss notes,

'variations in fan practices – rather than in objects of fandom – are increasingly

indicative of social and cultural difference.' (2005: 38)

The Non-Boardie/Boardie binaries that have repeatedly been

constructed – Fan/More Than a Fan; Typical/Atypical; Lazy/Active;

Uninterested in CMC/Interested in CMC – reflect a conception of fandom that

rewards and lauds something beyond the 'regular, emotionally involved

consumption' (Sandvoss 2005: 8) of a text. Kevin Smith fandom itself is coded

as something regular and unspectacular, whereas a Boardie is one who takes

that fandom and builds it into a social identity. A seeming contradiction, then,

is the "casual" fan who is part of a social event but does not consider themself

a Boardie.

Again representing an "excluded" audience member, Bryan is a friend of

slithybill's who accompanied him to the 2010 Red Bank meetup. Not having

posted on the Board beforehand, Bryan's participation in meetup social events

was merely a side effect of slithybill's attendance. Reflecting Ruth's "lazy"

fans who are quick to articulate Smith fandom via displays of fan cultural

capital, Bryan begins his account with a similar display of his fannish

activities:

> I enjoy [Smith's] movies, like to pop 'em in every now and again, listen
> to the commentaries – just seems like they're having fun doing what
> they're doing – it's kinda cool, I mean you don't really see that in
> Hollywood. (Live interview, 02/08/10)

Bryan's discussion of his practices – and the particular appeal Smith holds

within those practices – is reminiscent of the lauding via deferral in Chapter

One. Bryan's framing of Smith as the friendly producer suggests an awareness

of a context of mutual affirmation: he talks of his fandom in seemingly similar

terms as Boardies. Yet upon further inspection more evidence of Bryan's

"casual" attitude can be found. In a comparative response to Smith's DVD

production, TNAJason notes 'His movies are all classics in my mind, but he

has done so much more. There is his love of packing his DVDs to the brim

with commentaries, deleted scenes, and the like … I can't pick out a favorite.'

(Survey response, 25/05/10) Although a comparatively extreme example,

TNAJason's fannish enthusiasm emphasises Bryan's relaxed attitude.

Although I do not seek to claim one is "more of a fan" than the other, Bryan's

relaxation demonstrates that although aware of Smith's propensity for

"throwing up stuff that you don't normally see," (Ross 1999) he does not let

the context dominate his experience. Such a point is emphasised in Bryan's

discussion of Smith's sustained interactivity with Boardies:

> **Tom Phillips:** [Smith] is so interactive with his fans, I mean, are you
> aware of any of that interaction?
>
> **Bryan:** Oh yeah yeah it's just I don't wanna delve too far into that
> world, I mean there's other things I want to do as well. I'm more of a
> casual observer on the side … I didn't know about hockey games and
> all that kind of world, which – it's just kinda neat to see links every

now and then from [slithybill] you know "Hey check this out" and like "Oh that's pretty cool!" I'm just a little "on the side" kinda guy. I mean I can see where people could just delve into that … you can get really wrapped up in that world and spend hours – a week – and that's a choice, that's fine – that sense of community is really quite cool. Finding people with similar interests with you is great. But, I'm kind of a side guy. (Live interview, 02/08/10)

Bryan has had no desire or will to participate with fellow Kevin Smith fans in a social capacity, noting that his pre-existing friendship with slithybill is the only one that has Smith as a mutual interest (Ibid). What is notable is that Bryan is able to conceive of his fan practices as "on the side". Such phrasing can be interpreted in two ways: Firstly, that Smith fandom is not a central focus of Bryan's own cultural experience, that he prioritises other pursuits in his spare time. Alternatively, it could be recognition from Bryan that his fandom can perhaps be considered peripheral to Boardie activity (particularly in the context of being interviewed alongside his Boardie companion). Although Bryan's true meaning may be either, in categorising his Smith fandom in opposition to Boardies – with the centrality of Smith to their cultural experience, and of the Board to their social experience – Bryan demonstrates an understanding of how Boardies operate.

In contrast to Darth Predator and Speedy's utopian communal outlook, Bryan's decision to opt out of being a Boardie despite being aware of contexts of operation signals an active distinction being made to traverse the fan binaries discussed in this chapter. As a telling example, during the meetup location tour Bryan made a pointed effort to allow slithybill to enjoy the communal experience whilst not getting actively involved himself. In Figure 24 Bryan can be seen alone on the left hand side of the picture – almost literally "on the side" – helping to take photographs of the Quick Stop group

shot (Figure 18). In choosing instead to be a "typical" "fan" – enjoying the

cult geography on an individual level – Bryan demonstrates that although

aware of the democratic processes of fan capital open to him, based on

personal preference one can opt out. Such a decision signals that fannish

identity need not always conform to a particular model, and that Boardies –

although the "official" contingent of Kevin Smith fans – need not provide the

template for all Kevin Smith fans to follow.

Figure 24: Bryan (far left) opted to take photographs for others at the Quick Stop, rather than be part of group shots.

In acting in such a way, Bryan is seemingly conforming to the oppositional

binaries of Kevin Smith fandom. His "casual" actions would suggest his

comfort with a categorisation of "just" being a fan. However, in much in the

same way that Speedy notes her husband is still a Smith fan – and part of the

fan community – Bryan also categorises himself as part of an elite number:

> **TP:** ... Are you protective over being a Kevin Smith fan in any way? Is it something that means a lot to you in any way?
>
> **B:** … I don't know if protective is the right word. I mean, I'm the same way where if someone doesn't know that world, it's like why bother bringing that up? It's like, we're the small cult group – we're the ten per cent that get it, kind of thing. I mean just telling my co-workers where I was gonna be for vacation this couple of days they go "What?" It's like I send a link and they go "Oh, that guy!" And then that was it – I couldn't go any further than that. (Live interview, 02/08/10)

Being unable or unwilling to talk about Smith to his co-workers is reminiscent

of my own experience in being unable to accumulate fan capital in the face of

those unqualified to provide validation. Yet what is perhaps most significant is

the fact that Bryan classifies himself amongst the "ten per cent who get it",

thereby indicating that he does categorise himself as part of an exclusive

hierarchal group. As Mark Jancovich notes, fans by their definition rely on the

ability to create the sense of distinction,

> … which separates themselves as "fans" from what Fiske has rather tellingly referred to as 'more "normal" popular audiences' (Fiske 1992). In other words, in fan cultures, to be a fan is to be interesting and different, not simply a "normal" cultural consumer. (2002: 308)

Previously in this chapter I have noted how Boardies consider themselves the

"interesting and different" fans, whereas other Smith fans are "normal". Yet

what Bryan's testimony reveals is that as a Smith fan himself, he makes his

own distinction between someone who is "interesting and different" – the 'ten

per cent who get it' – and those who are "normal" – his 90% of other cultural

consumers. Such distinctions from Bryan reiterate that although the Board as a

site of Smith fandom is recognised as the most dialogic and communicative portal for fans to collate, Smith fandom as a whole is made up of intricate networks and hierarchal structures between various taxonomies, all functioning according to their own experiential contexts. Although the Board and the Boardies represent an aspect of fervent Smith fandom, that aspect is a very specific case study in and of itself, which operates both in relation and opposition to off-Board fandom.

Bryan's fan experience therefore signals that attempting to categorise Boardies and non-Boardies according to an oppositional binary is misguided. Different fan taxonomies of Kevin Smith fandom have their own respective conception of fan cultures and hierarchies, and to reduce non-Boardie practice to one amorphous "community" would do a disservice to the multiple intricacies of fan practice available. The experiences of Darth Predator, Speedy, and Bryan, although somewhat fortuitously co-opted for this study, make evident how highly Boardies value the sociality of their community, whilst also suggesting that studies of particular contingents of fans will necessarily make exclusions for the sake of more firm conclusions about more "knowable" communities. Section Two made the case that Boardie identity can be categorised as malleable, being redefined according to varied contexts, and this chapter has demonstrated how the conception of the identity of othered "Kevin Smith Fans" is similarly flexible.

Boardies, Consumers, and "Kevin Smith Fans"

In identifying the movement in media studies from the discussion of

"audience" to that of "audiences", which has assisted in the emergence of more detailed and specific audience analyses, Shaun Moores believes the distinction is preferable because the plural denotes several groups divided by their reception of different media, or by social/cultural positioning, despite the caveat that he believes the 'conditions and boundaries of audiencehood are inherently unstable' (1993: 2). In similar terms, charting Kevin Smith fan culture is a case of instead shifting a focus to Kevin Smith fan cultures.

This chapter has demonstrated that although oppositional binaries can be identified, practices for various taxonomies can just as easily be similar or crossover with one another. For instance, to return to Speedy's definition of one who should be considered part of the Smith fan community, she notes in very plain consumerist terms, 'A person who spends money consistently on Kevin's films & various merchandise is a fan and therefore they are part of the community.' (Email interview 21/12/10) Speedy's explicit link between commerce and fandom denotes that she believes fan consumer capital to be an important hierarchal indicator of fan worth, negating the emphasis on explicit sociality.

At this point, it could be tempting to place fans' consumerism within the fan-conceptualised Kevin Smith fan binary, but the notion of "bad" consumerism versus "good" fandom has already been noted in previous scholarly research. For example, in their study of "global fandom", C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby note that their research participants appeared to confirm the dominant conceptualisations that scholars held, such as believing that:

> [F]ans and consumers [exist] on the same continuum … with fans distinguished primarily by their degree of emotional, psychological, and/or behavioural *investment* in media texts … and/or their "active" *engagement* with media texts. … Participants also referred to issues of community, sociality, self-identification, and regularity of consumption in distinguishing fans from consumers. (2007: 186)

Similarly, Matt Hills has challenged what he believes is a 'one-sided' academic view of fandom citing Kurt Lancaster's (1996) portrayal of the binary of "bad" fan commodity to "good" fan community (2002: 28), before arguing that such a "continuum" of audience experience and identity (as noted above) presents a simplistic dualism of "good" fandom versus "bad" consumer (Ibid: 29).

However, despite Boardies' previous use of language suggesting that oppositional binaries are present in Kevin Smith fandom, in terms of measuring fandom by consumer tastes there is not necessarily a split between Boardies and non-Boardies – suggesting that the explicit opposing of separate fan groups may not be advisable, as artificially trying to impose oppositions becomes reductive and not representative of all forms of fan practice. For example, Talos' testimony demonstrates that consumerism can play a big part in Boardies' conceptualisations of fandom:

> I consider my friend David a bigger fan than I am even though he doesn't use the board at all. ... To me, he's a big fan as he sees all the movies as they come out, purchases them on DVD, and has some collectable memorabilia as well as books & other materials Kevin Smith has put out. To Kevin, he's probably a top notch fan because he is a consumer of his products … I would consider him a bigger fan than I am. (Email interview, 28/09/10)

Talos' lauding of David's fandom supplants the apparent Non-Boardie/Boardie binaries, rendering any Boardie-produced hierarchy seemingly irrelevant. Taking a similar position to Speedy in classifying strength of fandom

according to one's consumerist practices, Talos suggests that despite his active

engagement and investment in the Board community, economic practices can

wield credence in measuring fandom. For Talos then, there isn't a need to place

non-Boardies' fandom in opposition to the Board, and such a stance maintains

that "individual" fans – although perhaps "missing out" on community – can

still have their fan practices ratified.

What is notable from Talos is the manner in which he assesses the

value of David's fandom by noting how *Smith* would react to his consumer

practices, and Smith's presence in the role of consumerism-as-fandom appears

to be significant. As Janet Staiger notes, 'Fandom cannot be easily bifurcated

into good and bad,' (2000: 54), yet the notion of "good" fandom versus "bad"

consumer is complicated by Smith's fondness for his fans to articulate their

fandom through commerce, and such explicit encouragement frames his

mediated outputs including Twitter, and significantly, the Board as well. For

example, in addition to the Board logo (Figure 11), banners at the head and

foot of the page advertise various Smith events and products – Board

interaction is literally framed by an encouragement of commerce. As noted in

Chapter Four, Smith has been unapologetic in his self-promotion, noting to

Boardies that new participants represent 'Fresh blood (and, yes – fresh cash)'.

(Smith, Board post, 15/07/07).

Hills presents a definition of Abercrombie and Longhurst's "bad"

consumer, noting that 'consumers lack the developed forms of expertise and

knowledge that fans, enthusiasts and cultisits all possess in ever-increasing and

ever-more-specialised forms.' (2002: 29) Yet as Talos hints, Smith apparently

interprets and purports consumption to be "good" fan practice – for both

Boardies and non-Boardies alike, despite the presence of fan experience that constructs a context of Smith and Boardies mutually affirming one another's social practices. Smith values consumption, and this valuation is seemingly shared by fans.

Similar to the way I initially followed Smith's lead in valuing the input of particular Boardies,[54] non-Board Smith fans follow his lead in valuing consumption as an indicator of fandom. Attendance at a Smith live event, for example, is a significant economic commitment. Certainly for the Red Bank meetup, all Boardie attendees did actually attend Smith's Q&A show, suggesting that Boardies too are happy to acquiesce to Smith's producorial will – to buy the produce he sells. However, the social function of meetups, repeatedly emphasised in Section Two, demonstrates that for Boardies who have transferred Smith to the secondary cultural commodity of their community, economic commitment to their fan culture is valued but not at the expense of their sociality. Boardie culture can be informed by consumerism, but is not reliant on it. Boardies' consumer practices do maintain a link to other forms of Kevin Smith fandom – hence why Talos can value David's fandom in terms relative to his own – but Board culture itself maintains precedence because of the social function it holds.

This distinction means that oppositional values of "good" and "bad" fandom are maintained, but with one key difference: what is considered "good" and "bad" for different fan cultures – and for Smith himself – is not necessarily the same thing. Non-Boardies appear to value "good" consumerism, and take a

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[54] Specifically, those who had been on the Board longer and posted more often.

dim view of hyper social practices that can get in the way of celebrating Kevin

Smith. In contrast, Boardies value "good" sociality, with outright consumerism

coded as bad. Smith himself occupies some form of middle ground. Section

One emphasised his commitment to Boardie sociality, but he clearly

encourages the commodification of his brand.[55]

These conflicting conceptions demonstrate that there are at any one

time a number of varying subject positions and interpretations as to what

consititutes "fandom" or "fan practice", and subsequently whether these

actions are inherently "good" or "bad". As Milly Williamson notes,

competition between different sets of positions produce contradictory and

conflicting values of cultural worth, and rather than being 'a hermetically

sealed system, the struggles for dominance create the space (potentially) for

new positions within the cultural field.' (2005: 109) As a result, the varying

taxonomic positions of Boardie, non-Boardie, or Kevin Smith Fan in this fan

cultural field – while just a selection highlighted by this study – demonstrate

that charting fandom according to Boardie-produced binaries may not

necessarily depict an accurate image, and doing so means that fan behaviour is

formally delineated, and productivities are subsequently either enabled or

constrained. In contrast, fandom should be thought of as a subjective process,

where the declaration of "truth" or "legitimacy" should be considered based on

the position of those who use such labels.

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[55] Albeit knowingly. During the filming of *Clerks II*, for example, Smith 'wore oversized jerseys with such phrases as "Sell-Out" and "Total Whore." He [called] the movie "a train wreck," a way to head off those slams and a sign to those around him that he is well aware of fans' worries.' (Breznican 2006) Such behaviour demonstrates Smith's understanding of the way his image is perceived, and signals an attempt to deflect criticism by humorously acknowledging potential shortcomings first. Smith's friend Vincent Pereira notes, 'It all comes down to his belief that if he bashes himself, then other people can't bash him for the same things.' (Muir 2002: 98)

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the input of excluded fans can contribute to the further conception of an object of study, informing conclusions via their relative practices. Although no clear methodological solution has been presented, if the opportunity to collate such data presents itself one should consider that the data can and will have value to a study of a particular fan taxonomy. That experiential contexts of fandom exist outside the parameters of more readily delineated boundaries signals that the extent of fan cultures' operation can reach beyond the more "knowable", "identifiable", "active" fan communities that are more openly courted for academic study. This means that the processes of fandom more frequently depicted are only representative of those chosen as the object of study by the researcher, and only then (methodological and ethical considerations notwithstanding) of those who opt-in to the research.

Similar to the caution stated by Williams, who notes her 2004 research 'is by no means exhaustive,' (para.[9]) Nancy Baym notes that 'it is easy to select only cases that confirm researcher beliefs, creating a reflection of researcher assumptions rather than a valid (if necessarily incomplete) story of a community' (2000: 25). This chapter has addressed this concern by balancing the attention given to the primary community of study, offering instead a more discursive depiction of Kevin Smith fan activities, and in doing so further taxonomies of Smith fandom have been tentatively charted. Sandvoss notes that 'It is through the processes of appropriation in everyday life that …

mediated texts become objects of fandom, as we make the … product our own, creating its particular emotional significance.' (2005: 12) In the case of this chapter, the "we" in this instance can refer to fans in the singular or the plural, and emotional significance is something that can belong to any that have articulated it, rather than measured by a taxonomy-specific hierarchy.

That differing communities and fans value emotional significance according to differing criteria (and thus differing hierarchies) is to be expected. What this chapter demonstrates, however, is that such hierarchal distinctions – in scholarship at least – should perhaps not matter. Much like Baym's (1998) definition of community, ultimately fans are fans if they label themselves as such, and any judgements or value attributed to various fan activities by scholars is similarly dependent on their own subject position.[56]

There is an underlying tension to Kevin Smith fandom on the Board, as it purports to be the closest to Smith and the "official" fan community, yet this position is undermined by the elevation of sociality to primary cultural commodity. The inherent tension then makes itself apparent in the relations between Boardies and non-Boardies, as each taxonomy makes a claim to "genuine" Kevin Smith fandom: Boardies' position as social fans comes from their belief that their "emotional" relationship with Smith (detailed in Section One) allows them to occupy a space beyond fandom, where non-Boardies claim this very space negates claims to fandom in the first place. John Fiske observes such patterns of distinction in the way fans create boundaries between themselves and others:

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[56] As was made clear in the Introduction and throughout, my interpretation of Boardies' activities – and of non-Board Smith fans – is inflected by my own scholar-fan position.

> Fans discriminate fiercely: the boundaries between what falls within their fandom and what does not are sharply drawn. And this discrimination in the cultural sphere is mapped into distinctions in the social – the boundaries between the community of fans and the rest of the world are just as strongly marked and patrolled. Both sides of the boundary invest in the difference; mundane viewers often wish to avoid what they see as the taint of fandom … On the other side of the line, fans may argue about what characteristics allow someone to cross it and become a true fan, but they are clearly agreed on the existence of the line. (1992: 34-5)

What this chapter demonstrates is that indeed, there is a line between fandom and non-fandom, and there is agreement that such a line *exists* by all those who identify as Kevin Smith fans. Yet what constitutes "true" fandom is still contested – for some to truly be a Kevin Smith fan is to indulge in economic displays of fan cultural capital; for others it is adopting Smith fandom as part of a socially networked identity. Johnson discusses such a distinction in fans' differing interpretations in his analysis of the varying *Buffy* fan factions, explaining that competing fan interests 'advocate rival "truths" that codify and recodify fandom within continually contested parameters.' (2007: 287) But where Johnson's approach considers the differing ways in which fans use and understand the fan textual object, in this thesis the difference is in fans' prioritisation of the fan object itself.

The repeated distinctions drawn between fan groups signals that even under an umbrella categorisation, some will always be othered or excluded to some extent. Legitimisation thus occurs at micro levels of fan interaction, where the experiential contexts of each informs the process and outcome. The extent to which one will be seen as a Kevin Smith Fan, Boardie, or part of the fan "family" seemingly depends on what kind of fan experience that person is actually looking for.

Conclusion

An Askew View?

In July 2010 the Board was briefly shut down as a result of producer-fan conflict, where a small selection of Boardies were posting material on the Board that Smith found objectionable. Citing this event in the context of Section One allowed a discussion of the way the Boardies used the subsequently established Emergency Backup Board as a "refuge" whilst unable to use the "official" fan space. Section Two was able to extend this analysis, as the specifics of "Boardie" identity was discussed in an (offline) context away from the View Askew Message Board itself. In contrast, Section Three was able to offer a depiction of fannish practice when the Board is not used at all. As this thesis has addressed, the term "Boardie", then, is one which can be used to describe a participant in a culture which takes Kevin Smith fandom at its origins, but now encompasses a more generalised community of on- and offline social activity.

Further challenging the ties of "Boardie" identity to Kevin Smith's officially hosted web space, in February 2012 the Board was permanently shut down, and once again the EBB became a favoured migratory virtual space for Boardies. Yet the manner in which users responded to these two separate instances of closure – one temporary and one permanent – demonstrates the evolution of the relationship between Kevin Smith and Boardies, and how their concerns about Smith's commitment to their fan culture (as noted in Chapter

Four) manifest themselves in attitudes that explicitly confirm the repositioning of the community culture away from Smith fandom.

The permanent closure of the Board – and the ill will from some towards Smith as a result – represents a significant unexpected event as an epilogue to this study. Setting out to initially capture the study of a fan community over a short period of time, this thesis began by lauding the longevity of the View Askew Message Board, never anticipating that the central online hub of the community would be gone by the tail end of the research period. As a result, the closure of the Board offers a valuable and unexpected opportunity to reflect on the findings detailed in the first three sections of this thesis, as well as potentially offer a chance to examine fans' own "post-mortem" on the former central hub of their community.

However, doing so does not come without resultant methodological and ethical hindrances. As Natasha Whiteman notes, 'the researcher must be responsive to the unexpected and … the ethical stances we develop may change and may need to be stabilised,' (2012: 14) and this concluding section will consider the nature of the unexpected in research and how one's methodological tactics may change. Drawing on notions of "post object" (Williams 2011) or "zombie" (Whiteman and Metivier 2013) fan cultures, I conclude this thesis with an examination of Boardie culture as it stands after the main period of data collation.

Yet doing so requires a reconsideration of my methodological and ethical stance, laid out in the Introduction. The preceding three sections take as their primary evidence qualitative data derived from an online survey, email

correspondence, and face-to-face interviews. However, in deriving material for a discussion of Boardie activity in a post-Board context, and to consider the impact of such a change to the research process, it has been necessary to include some material gleaned directly from the Emergency Backup Board, and not necessarily from those who have explicitly chosen to opt-in to the process.

Before introducing this material, it is firstly necessary to discuss the ethical implications of doing so, particularly when it opposes the stance I have taken thus far. Providing justification for the content to follow, here I expand on that which I hinted in Section Three – that exclusionary methodological considerations of the researcher can limit one's perception of a particular fan culture. In order to do this, I discuss Boardies' response to my work: for having had the opportunity to read material that has appeared in this thesis, the subsequent response and discussion about outside (academic) perception can be indicative of the ethical and methodological considerations one should make.

Following this, I more closely examine the dissolution of the Board, providing a comparative analysis of Boardies' responses to the 2010 and 2012 closures, revealing the way in which fan-object relations can fluctuate over time and hinting at a decisive shift in Boardies' primary cultural commodity. This Conclusion, then, offers a self-reflexive look at the ethical and methodological ramifications of fan studies research, using knowledge of fans' experiential contexts of practice, offline backchannelling, and fan taxonomies to consider the study of one particular fan culture as a product of its time.

Feedback: Ethical and Methodological Considerations

As noted in the Introduction, Robert Kozinets recommends the establishment of a research webpage that provides 'positive identification as well as a more detailed explanation of the research and its purpose, and perhaps should eventually share the initial, interim, and final research findings with online community members.' (2010: 148) To this end, at the beginning of the data collection period I established a research blog,[57] to function as a separate "official" space to interact with research participants away from the field of the Kevin Smith fan forum, intending it to be a space in which to disseminate my research findings and showcase my work to participants and others in a public forum.

Seeking to boost the appearance of my scholarly legitimacy in terms of studying Kevin Smith and his fans, the blog initially featured very Smith-centric content. I featured for instance an essay on the negotiation of gross out and romantic comedy in *Zack and Miri Make a Porno*; hosted a link to my initial thesis questionnaire; and posted material that would eventually form part of my Introduction's discussion of my scholar-fandom. In addition, I used the blog to address the concerns of Boardies regarding the scope and validity of my research. For example, when one Boardie asked general questions about my institution, school, and research plan, I was able to offer this justification:

> I'm at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, England, in the School of Film and Television Studies. I wouldn't say it's a sociological or psychological study – my area of interest is audience studies and fan culture, so I'm not looking for any deep-seated Freudian explanations

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[57] Hosted at http://www.peepingtomresearch.com.

> as to why people post online, I'm just interested in how fans operate when they come together
>
> …
>
> The general hypothesis of the study is looking at how Kevin Smith fans (including myself) operate in the View Askew community, and how fandom and/or relationships may be influenced by the fact Kevin initiated The Board and even participates (something that is pretty distinctive in fan studies, hence where I'm making a contribution to the field).
>
> …
>
> There are other areas I'd like to cover, but as this is an audience research project, the direction of my work is governed by the responses I get, e.g. if I wanted to talk about (x), but everyone wants to talk about (y), that may be an unexpected turn, but my project will follow suit.[58]

However, although consenting Boardies who had contributed to my study were content and aware of my research practices, when *another* researcher made an entrée to the Board seeking research participants, once again my intent was called into question. Seeking participants for her PhD thesis *Consuming Transmedia* (2012), Emma Beddows' introductory post was met with some Boardies taking umbrage to being "lab rats" for us both, with User A in particular objecting vocally. Entering into a dialogue with User A, I attempted to present a similar justification to that seen above, and when User A maintained hostility towards me I attempted to appease her[59] by linking to a blog post which featured an extended discussion of my methodological aims.[60]

However, what is significant is that although I used the blog as a formal space separate from the fannish confines of the Board, User A's responses to my work only ever took place on the Board itself. The Board was seemingly a

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[58] http://peepingtomresearch.wordpress.com/2010/05/13/answer-to-a-question/
[59] For all anonymous users I adopt female pronouns. This gender-specific language is not necessarily a reflection of the gender of the users, but is intended rather for clarity of writing.
[60] I make reference to the hostility of this exchange in Chapter Five.

more comfortable space for Boardies to discuss my work: although my blog post received no comments, the dialogue with User A went back and forth over the course of around three hours. User A's decision to debate with me "on her own turf" signals that although a separate website can provide extended information, the research space itself can be used more effectively to disseminate and discuss findings, and is often preferential for participants themselves. Although I had attempted to follow this path in my entrée to the Board – making clear my research intent in my "first" post – if I had maintained this on-Board method of dissemination then conflict may have been avoided.

Two years later, in response to a blog entry written for the I.B. Tauris blog (Phillips 2012b), which presented a condensed form of discussions around the experiential context of Acquiescence, a topic thread on the EBB began to discuss my work and Boardies' responses to it. Again, although *participants* in my research had been informed about prior publication of my work (2010; 2011; 2012a), for non-participants this was largely the first time they had seen it. The largely derisory response – questioning the validity and scope of my work – raises some interesting questions about the methodological process of the thesis.

Where Kozinets proposed a feedback model whereby community members are given additional opportunities 'to add their "voice into their own representation"' (2010: 148), such an opportunity is only available to those who choose to participate in the first instance. Within the EBB thread, there seemed to be anger that my methodology excluded some opinions and only gave "one point of view". Much like Caroline Brettell, who in meeting

resistance to her anthropological research noted 'The past is a cultural possession, and I was naive in thinking that I was on safe ground in talking about it,' (1993: 99), I was confident in my ethical integrity, yet my work still apparently had wider reaching cultural effects on the Boardie community which I hadn't considered. In opposition to the ethical stance I had adopted, there seemed to be annoyance that in only including the fan responses of those who *wanted* to participate, my work would give an incomplete conceptualisation of Boardies' practices. My use of data therefore amounts to my analysis imposing a biased reading of my research contexts. Although I have attempted to address this bias with explicit reference to the subjectivity of my scholar-fan experience, the ethical implications of such an imposition should still be acknowledged.

Part of the justification I initially gave to Boardies for studying their culture was that 'it annoys me that there are so many studies of fans of Star Trek or Buffy, but nothing has been published about View Askew fans. My study [will give] this unique, fascinating community a voice, and recognition within the academic world.' (PeepingTom, Board post, 12/05/10). However, this initial justification now potentially undermines my analysis, as in my attempts to give scholarly "recognition" to the community, I failed to take into account the fact that my analysis would likely be the most prominent scholarly public representation of the Board.

Whilst correct to reference the "many" fan studies of *Buffy* (Gatson and Zweerink 2004; Tabron 2004; Williams 2004; Williamson 2005; Kirby-Diaz 2009) or *Star Trek* (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Jindra 1994; Kozinets 2001; Coppa 2008), my justification didn't adequately address the fact that a

multitude of studies enables a multitude of different subject positions to be covered. Whilst my research would aim to build on the work of others using Kevin Smith fan culture as a case study, for Boardies the domineering aspect of my justification would be that Kevin Smith fandom was hitherto unstudied. Although Brettell has noted that the anthropological scholarly tradition means subjects frequently receive renewed scholarly attention because of the varying biased ways in which memory is shaped (1993: 93), at the time my research was called into question Beddows' work was not publicly available to correlate or dispute my analysis. As such my work would carry the burden of representation for this particular fan culture.

The strain of this burden is of my own doing, and as Brettell notes, such a failure in communication between research and researched 'stems from the difference between the way our respondents understand and frame something and the way it is framed within ethnography or social science.' (1993: 101). For a scholarly audience there is a general understanding of the implications of academic writing; for example, including a description of the methods I adopted means that whenever the term "Boardies" is used, it can be considered academic shorthand for "the Boardies who participated in my research as a result of the methods detailed above". For someone like User A however, the term "Boardies" understandably means "all Boardies". The disparity between these interpretations is something the researcher needs to reconcile, and as a result the ethical needs of those who may interpret research as all-inclusive should be taken into account.

In summarising the arguments of Waskul and Douglas (1996: 132) and Bakardjieva and Feenberg (2001: 239) Natasha Whiteman suggests that there

is a problem in the suggestion that 'adhering to the ethics of the researched is the best thing we can do for our research participants,' and to repeat a point made in the Introduction, 'it is important that we attend to the ethics of our research contexts in developing our ethical stances.' (2012: 68) In a reflection on this process,[61] Martin Barker suggests that decisions on ethics should be with the participants – or subjects of study – rather than the researcher. In Section Three, I argue that the inclusion of data from "excluded" audiences can help to make conclusions about the main group of study through their relative difference. Although I was the beneficiary of fortunate research circumstances there, I believe that the same principle applies here. Following this rationale, non-participating Boardies' engagement with my work – and lamenting that their views were not "properly" articulated – can be interpreted as a form of implied consent. In addition, my prior experience has demonstrated that Boardies are often more comfortable with discussion within their own online space, providing justification for the ethical inclusion of their relevant EBB posts here.

Responding to my interpretation of the context of Acquiescence, User C summarises for others, 'Basically, we're all whiny jerks who think message boards are better than Twitter. Especially babydoll.' (EBB post, 25/03/12) Summarising my analysis in pejorative terms, User C's specific reference to the contribution of babydoll seems particularly scathing. Babydoll was quoted as describing Smith's social network practices as an "abandonment" of the Board (Email interview 23/07/10), yet her unpopularity with some Boardies

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[61] At the COST YECREA 'Audiences: a cross generational dialogue' Workshop, Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, Brussels, 11/04/12.

subsequently coded my adoption of her testimony as something that undermined my credibility.[62] As a result, User A referred to my study as a 'total [waste] of everyone's time' (EBB post, 26/03/12).

Questioning the validity of my participants demonstrates the presence of inter-Boardie divisions and hierarchies, such as that hinted in Chapter Six, where ima_dame references some Boardies as "the cousins whose name you don't quite know". In that case, I posed that ima_dame's conception of fan "family" did not necessarily indicate uniform intimacy, but a strong relational involvement nevertheless links participants. Whilst not discounting this claim, the EBB thread took issue with the fact I conceived of the fan "family" in the first place:

> it is inaccurate at best, misleading or false at worst, to say that the viewaskew fan community, was/is "like a family" … if you asked [Tears In Rain] if he considered riddler "family" we would start to get to a more accurate description of the entire community, not just [Tears In Rain]'s closest circle of friends from the baord who i am sure ARE like family to him, and in one case are his literal family. same for [Ruth] and LDG, or [ima_dame] and me. none of those people actually think of all (or even the majority) of boardies to be "like family" (User A, EBB post, 27/03/12)

Although User A staunchly disagrees with my interpretation of fan activity, the Boardies who I have become friends with, whom I have communicated with on- and offline in an off-Board capacity, *have* reflected my experience – and my analysis – of the Kevin Smith fan family. Celia Pearce describes the

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[62] User D noted that 'babydoll … was hated for her horrible attitude, her lack of intelligence (or lack of showing it if she had any), her near constant complaining, and when she wasn't complaining, she was either bragging or insulting someone who didn't deserve it, ETC. … i'm sure she had some redeeming qualities, but i never saw any trace of them.' (EBB post, 06/07/12)

intensely personal hurt she felt when her PhD work was criticised by her

community of study (2009: 228), and the personal investment I have put it into

my research means not only is my scholarly practice called into question, but

also the validity of the interpersonal relationships I have crafted. Much like

Dona Davis, 'What I saw as legitimate complaints about [my research] did not

bother me as much as the rumors and untruths that circulated about it.' (1993:

32) User F suggests that my personal investment meant that my data was

inevitably going to be biased towards those who more actively engage in

communal activities:

> … I think that [family] aspect was solely related to the board/events. I
> don't think there is any sense of "family", positive or negative, among
> Kevin's Twitter fans (which might be something to explore in your
> future research, Tom) because there is no shared experience to bond
> them and they don't even really have to look at each other's words.
>
> Even the events, while often LIKE a family reunion, were not exactly.
> (EBB post, 27/03/12)

Even though User F doesn't necessarily agree with my conception of fan

family, she at least agrees that the *idea* of family may exist for some users.

Similarly, she also confirms my analysis that there is a distinct separation in

the practices between Boardies and non-Boardies, making evident the value of

including "excluded" opinion, as it can inform the primary site of study.

However, what links the testimonies of Users A and F is the suggestion

that those who choose to participate in an academic study are necessarily going

to be those who are more genial to "strangers" on the web in the first place. For

these EBB Boardies, gaining data for use in scholarly analysis is automatically

going to present a skewed view of any particular culture precisely because of

the nature of participation. As noted above, Garry Crawford notes much the

same, observing that it is frequently 'only the "active" type of audience … that are seen as worthy of consideration and study.' (2012: 103) Such an observation warrants further consideration of a methodological and ethical quandary: in choosing a technique prior to the commencement of data collection, does the researcher eschew a sound ethical stance in the hope of providing a more "balanced" conception of a culture, or should one only use the testimony of those who gave their explicit consent for participation in study, and in so doing, potentially limit the scope of analysis of the object of study?

As noted above, Whiteman posits that answers to ethical questions must be produced relationally (2012: 20), suggesting that there is no clear "right" or "wrong" approach, only what is more appropriate for the study at hand. In this thesis, the research process allowed a study of Boardies to expand to a wider remit of Kevin Smith fans through circumstance, and thus far I have shown how non-participants' implied consent may be derived from feedback processes. However, although my ethical approach is based on a very specific unexpected research context – and as noted in the Introduction, one should account for the unexpected – such a prospect should not be counted on. Although the researcher may be able to *hope* to provide a "balanced" account by being all-inclusive, in practice the parameters for exclusion go beyond the researcher's control.

Establishing the boundaries for those who will be included in the research process – most easily achieved via an explicit opt-in system – allows the researcher to definitively state that those excluded from the study chose not to participate, and as a result analysis will be representative of a very specific

view of fandom and fan practice. An askew view, then, will always inflect the research of fan studies that opt for such control, but this inflection of subjectivity should not be thought of as a limitation. Rather, as Williams (2004) and Baym (2000) hint, in sketching the contours of a community or fan culture, one can leave a platform on which others can build.

The particular views of participants I have constructed in Sections One to Three make evident that those who label themselves Boardies tend to have a preoccupation with sociality, and those who shun that label are more interested in practicing their Kevin Smith fandom on a more individual basis. The special circumstances as a result of the Board's closure now allow me to build on my own prior findings. Yet what is important to note is the fact that these are indeed *special* circumstances – if the Board were not in turmoil in 2012, the context of Boardies' response to my work (and response to the Board's closure) would be completely different. If the Board had remained open, the justification for including non-participating Boardies' views would arguably not be as strong. Ultimately, the position I take – based on the experience of this research and desires of those involved – is to begin one's research maintaining proper ethical integrity and transparency (which includes only studying those who have given consent), and (as has previously been articulated by others [Busse and Hellekson 2012; Whiteman 2012]) only making concessions *should* research circumstances change.

The change in research circumstance here allows for an examination of the specificities of the 2012 Board closure and Boardies' migration to the EBB, and how such an event can reflect back on the findings of this thesis. Specific reference to EBB posts can further contribute to the conception of Board

behaviour, and a consideration of the end of a fannish space can work to consider a fan cultures' changing relationship with an object of their affection in a new context.

The Emergency Backup Board: Penitence

As noted by Natasha Whiteman and Joanne Metivier, 'the collapse/closure of fan communities remains a relatively under-examined topic,' (2013: 275), with many studies interested in that question as noted by Hills – "*Why* are you a fan of…?" (2002: 66) – and in the nature of how fandom operates and functions in varying contexts. Without the 2012 closure of the Board, this thesis would have exclusively contributed to the latter body of work, and although my interpretation of the nature of Boardie identity would remain the same, the significance of the Board itself as the central online hub for participants would still be foremost in my account.

Yet with the closure of the Board, the opportunity to examine how this particular fan community has responded to this change in situation allows an investigation in the light of a new research context. I examine response to Smith and his role in the dissolution of the communal hub, making a comparison with Chapters One and Four where the relationship between Smith and his fans was discussed in relation to contrasting modes of affirmation and acquiescence. Here I will demonstrate how the difference in Boardies' attitudes from the 2010 temporary Board closure to the 2012 permanent signals a shift from penitence, to outright hostility, and this behavioural shift is emblematic of a more pointed preoccupation with sociality and a diminished importance of

Smith to the fan culture. Such a change treads more familiar ground of oppositions and fractures in relations between fans and fan object (Brooker 2002: 77-99; Jones 2003), and is particularly notable in the light of Smith's previously vocal stance on his communicative and fruitful relationship with Boardies.

One of the most notable facets of the "endings" noted in previous research is the way in which they were telegraphed in some manner. Most obviously for some fan communities, an end can be suggested by the change in status to a "post-object" fan culture, something Rebecca Williams defines as:

> … "fandom of any object which can no longer produce new texts."
> However … [rather] than considering post-object fandom as indicating
> that fandom is "over," the term is intended to allow us to consider the
> differences in fan practices and response between periods when objects
> are ongoing and dormant. (2011a: 269)

The end of "official" textual production of the original fan object can provide a sense of closure for some fans, and marks something of a "logical" ending for some fan communities (Gatson and Zweerink 2004). However, as Suzanne Scott notes, 'Ironically, the "death" of a show … can often breathe new life into fan-authored texts, as audiences turn from official to unofficial narratives.' (2008: 215), and as Williams, and Kalviknes Bore and Hickman (2013) demonstrate, fan productivities can thrive in a suitably nurturing environment despite the fan object no longer producing new material.

Yet despite any "logical" end points for online communities, endings appear to separate into either non-telegraphed or telegraphed. In their discussion of the dissolution of academic networking and knowledge-sharing community MediaMOO, for example, Amy Bruckman and Carlos Jensen note

a gradual decline in activity which coincided with the lack of formal

administration, and users' desire to move to more "modern" webspaces (2002).

There was no official end point – users just began to drift away as their tastes

and practices changed. In contrast, Whiteman and Metivier note how on the

Angel City of Angel forum there was a "long goodbye" period of three days,

where the announcement of the site's closure:

> … was to momentarily re-invigorate the site at the point of its
> termination, with members gathering to post their final goodbyes (in
> threads with titles like *One Last Time; My Very Last Thread on COA;
> My Goodbye Post*), sharing reminiscences, and voicing disappointment.
> Members also looked to the future and attempted to ensure the
> conservation of relationships that had been established within the
> forums. (2013: 280)

In comparison, the first warning of the 2010 temporary closure of the Board

came 20 minutes before content was locked, after an announcement by Jennifer

Schwalbach. With no prior advertisement of a shut down, many Boardies were

caught unaware, with their first knowledge of the lock coming when they

suddenly found themselves unable to post. Subsequently, there was no

explicitly acknowledged reason for the lock from either Schwalbach, Smith, or

webmaster Ming Chen. Although the closure came as a result of conflict

between Schwalbach and a small contingent of posters (who were posting

objectionable content in one thread), some users like TheManWhoLikesSMod

were left to try and figure out why the community was closed:

> I logged onto the board and saw that the Chatter section had a big ol'
> lock symbol next to it. I clicked on it anyway and checked the most
> recent postings in Jen's thread, The Den. I saw that she said the Board
> was closing down because of certain members acting up or something
> to that effect. I wasn't entirely sure, but she seemed pretty upset about
> it. (Email interview 13/07/10)

As a result, there was no prolonged opportunity for Boardies to say goodbye or reminisce in the manner described by Whiteman and Metivier. Instead, Boardies' response was largely reactive, as the Emergency Backup Board was hastily established as a refuge and the news disseminated across backchannelled networks. Roguewriter and Cathy reflect on how they heard about the Board lock:

> Sunday morning, I checked email and immediately noticed seven new private-message notices. I'm not a big PM guy – I normally might get seven messages in three months! – so I was instantly like "Uh-oh, someone on the board died."[63]… Weird, right? As it turned out, the Board itself had died, or at least gone on life-support. (Roguewriter, email interview, 13/07/10)

> Got a pm from [Runs] at 5am on Sunday. … I did joke that [Koalafishmutantbird] would be the one I would save from a burning board tho. (Cathy, email interview, 13/07/10)

Roguewriter and Cathy here demonstrate how the backchannelled information reached them the morning after the lock. Roguewriter's surprise at the number of private messages received signals the exceptional nature of the event, as channels of his regular CMC were disrupted in order to relay the information. Rather than comprising just another part of Boardies' online routines, the lock required significant effort in order to spread communication. For example, Ruth notes that she 'twittered of the closure … [which] furthered to emailing about 15 different people, and another 10 or so via PM,' (Email interview, 14/07/10) and Duff 'sent out 50 or 60 PMs' (Email interview, 13/07/10). The volume of backchannelled communication – with no organised or cohesive mobilisation – hints at the disruptive effect the lockdown had, where

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[63] Roguewriter's concern stems from the death of another Boardie in 2009, the news of which was similarly passed via private messages and other backchannels.

individual, rather than collective, action was taken in order to preserve the community. In opposition to the normative communal position of "collective deliberation" and shared actions (Jenkins 2006: 233; Eaton 2010: 176), Boardies' individual responses become indicative of a community in crisis; where confusion and disorganisation force a panicked cohort to prioritise preservation of the community, at times before comprehending why the situation has occurred in the first place.

Roguewriter and Cathy's responses further reveal the strength of feeling held towards the Board as a communal space. Whilst not knowing at the time that the lockdown was a temporary closure, the language used by both reflects that articulated by users of the COA forum, where 'A number of posters responded in stronger terms to … the brief notice period that members had been given before the plug was to be pulled. A couple made reference to the site being "switched off and murdered"' (Whiteman and Metivier 2013: 280). Whiteman and Metivier discuss this behaviour in the context of what they term "zombie fandoms", which describe fan communities 'that have entered into a state of atrophy, decline or impending demise,' (Ibid: 270) yet in using the term "zombie" emphasise that 'the sense of death as the presence or absence of energy/vitality does not always, by definition, coincide with the end of biological existence.' (Ibid: 291) What is implied then, is that the inverse of a "dead" fandom – in this case simply "fandom" or "fan culture" – is something which can be ascribed attributes characteristic of an organic, living entity.

In making such explicit reference to death, processes of euthanasia, and invoking visceral images of destruction, Roguewriter, Cathy, and Whiteman

and Metivier's COA fans emphasise the way in which the demise of a community may be categorised in emotional terms. Despite the fact that the community may migrate to another location, and other backchannels keep lines of communication open, the loss of a particular single space – and its symbolic function as the communal hub of the culture – evokes a particularly potent response. The framing of the dissolution of an online space as destructive is reflected in the way in which Gatson and Zweerink describe the final hours of the "official" Bronze, where 'Bronzers engaged in a member-directed virtual deconstruction of their place to go along with the owner-directed actual destruction of it.' (2004: 136)

Yet where the Board differs, and why the framing of the lockdown in a context of death and destruction is significant, is in the fact that aesthetically there was no change. The threads were locked, meaning that no new content could be added, and symbolised by "lock" graphics next to each subforum (Figure 25). Yet the forum was preserved in its entirety – there was no requirement for Boardies to archive or preserve threads – and private messaging on the site remained functional. As a result, the Board could continue to act as a social network node for the fan community, and (as noted in Chapter Four) its maintained status became symbolic for the authority that Smith and View Askew had as an overriding social cohesive. Whilst the Board remained – if not fully functional, than at least accessible – its importance as the central hub of the fan community was not diminished.

Figure 25: Locked subforums on the Board. http://viewaskew.com/theboard/

As noted in Chapter Four, Roguewriter used the 2010 Board closure to reassert

his commitment to "official" Smith fandom, opting against posting on the EBB

in order to pledge his loyalty to Smith, and the July 2010 EBB FAQ thread

firmly establishes Smith's (and Schwalbach's) role as integral to the culture.

Under the heading 'What happened to viewaskew? Why are we all gathering

here?' User B states:

> Put simply (and from my limited knowledge of what went down),
> certain things had been building up for months on the Board that were
> causing Jen and Kevin aggravation, generally involving self-entitlement
> of Boardies and inappropriate content in certain threads. This was not
> the fault of any one person or post. … If you really absolutely need
> more details on what went down, you can check The Den thread on
> View Askew (while it's still readable), specifically the last few pages.
> (EBB post, 11/07/10)

In her explanation for why the Board was closed, User B firmly places

emphasis on the consequences for Smith and Schwalbach, rather than the

Boardies, and in stating that 'if you really *absolutely need* more details' (my

emphasis), makes it clear that the exact reasons for the Board's closure are not

relevant: instead of looking for a particular user to blame, Boardies should

instead assume communal responsibility for behaviour that apparently

aggravated Smith and Schwalbach, and use the EBB as an opportunity to

express affection for the Board as the preferred virtual space. Such a reading is

compounded by the way User B refers to the closure as 'a chance to appreciate

what we've lost,' with User A making reference to the Board's post-count

ranking system by stating that on the EBB 'everyone is a jizz mopper forever

… we need to be humbled.' The expression of guilt here is similar to how

COA users invoked 'a sense of culpability in the fate of the site evident in the

expression of apologies from members who had not been around for a while'

(Whiteman and Metivier 2013: 282).

User B's admission of thanks to Smith and Schwalbach reinforces the

experiential contexts of affirmation and acquiescence that marked activity on

the Board, and demonstrate how that feeling was able to transcend spatial

boundaries and carry over to EBB activity:

> If I may be so bold as to speak for the community, I'd like to thank Jen, Kevin and the rest of the administrative staff for providing us with weeks, months and for some people many years of enjoyment and escape from the toils of life. And for helping to bring together a community that is clearly going to survive even beyond this unfortunate turn of events. (EBB post, 11/07/10)

Although User B refers to the idea that the community will exist beyond the

contextual framework of View Askew, prioritising an acknowledgement of the

"admin" role in shaping user experience undermines the communal

construction of Boardie identity and instead frames "Boardies" as a result of

the efforts of an elite owner hierarchy. Such gratitude in Smith, Schwalbach,

and View Askew employees was reflected in EBB posts made throughout the
Board's temporary closure (much like the "mourning" posts seen in Whiteman
and Metivier's study), but Boardies still looked to Smith for approval and
direction, echoing the relationship that characterised the experiential context of
acquiesce as noted in Chapter One. By referring to the consequences of the
Board closure in relation to the effect it may have on Smith, and by citing
tweets from Smith referring to the incident, Boardies demonstrated that the
function of the EBB was to provide a virtual space where the importance of
Smith to the culture could be reflected on.

As a result of the EBB's focus of Boardie identity in relation to Smith,
the 2010 Board hiatus (perhaps paradoxically) marks the relative strength of
communal identity at the time. When User B poses the question 'Why are we
all gathering here?' (my emphasis) there is an acknowledgement of the
collective migratory process that is occurring. Although blame was attributed
to Boardie's use of inappropriate material (Roguewriter, email interview,
13/07/10), with a single incident characterising 'the group that took it too far'
(Duff, email interview, 13/07/10), the EBB's FAQ thread appears to take a
stance of collective responsibility – the penitence shown demonstrates the way
in which Boardie identity can transfer to another online space just as easily as
it can move offline, as long as there remains a symbolic anchor. In this case
Smith, with his symbolic capital as shared origin of communal activity, keeps
Boardie activity going by virtue of still being accessible in some form. Much
how in an offline context Smith's cultural production – hosting hockey games
or Q&As – provided a social flashpoint for Boardies, online Smith's presence

on SNSs and the continued (albeit limited) functionality of the Board fed into the maintenance of Boardie identity.

The acquiescence to producorial authority is continued with a demonstration of the understanding that the closure of the Board was a right of Smith's. TheManWhoLikesSMod for instance notes that:

> … Kevin and Jen have every right to lock it for a while and give it a thorough washing. Kevin, Jen, and Ming founded it and as such they have the right to do what they want with it. While yes it is a bummer to me ... I understand where they are coming from. (Email interview 13/07/10)

Such acceptance of the situation is reflected in Bentcountershaft's interpretation, where he allows the migration of the EBB to be seen as a positive step, reinforcing Boardie communal values:

> … the small time on [the EBB] has encouraged me to participate a lot more in discussion and also make off board connections (Facebook and such) which I never really considered doing before. I think there is a lot of camaraderie there due to the fact that we were all in the same boat. … When we all were thrown out it had a very unifying affect, at least temporarily which I found to be wonderful. (Email interview, 20/07/10)

The collective experience of the Board closure therefore acted as a unifying incident, functioning as a "historical" flashpoint, to be semiotically interpreted and used to inform future experiential contexts – most likely with the intention that such a rash closure would not happen again due to Boardies having "learned their lesson".

Smith's own acknowledgement and management of the closure was responded to cynically by Johnboy, who remained sceptical that the Board would remain closed (despite Smith having 'outgrown' the space) as it

remained 'a powerful marketing arm' (Email interview 14/7/10). Somewhat

presciently, upon the relaunch of the Board to a new dedicated webspace a few

days after the closure, Smith began to advertise the community in earnest,

promoting the Board to his Twitter followers:

> **@ThatKevinSmith:** I ASSURE YOU WE'RE RE-OPENED! The ViewAskew Message Board v.3 is now ready to be joined! BE IN THE FIRST 1000! http://theviewaskewboard.com (Twitter, 20/07/10)[64]

> **@ThatKevinSmith:** Before Twitter, this is where I sat around answering questions: http://theviewaskewboard.com/ The Message Board resets to zero! JOIN NOW! (Twitter, 20/07/10)[65]

> **@ThatKevinSmith:** Not at ComiCon? Looking for friends? Husbands have met wives & kids exists because of this board: http://theviewaskewboard.com Join up & go! (Twitter, 24/07/10)[66]

Smith's commitment to advertising the Board in such a manner makes clear his

commitment to his friendly producorial persona identified in Chapter One, with

reference to the Board resetting 'to zero' initially seeming to indicate that there

is to be an eradication of the tension and hierarchy that may previously have

occurred between Boardies and non-Boardies. Such a statement works to offer

a utopian view of democratic friendship and community that reflects Darth

Predator and Speedy's non-Boardie view as seen in Chapter Seven.

However, despite the offer to be "one of the first", Smith's tweets

confirm other aspects of Boardies' experiential contexts identified throughout

Section One, reinforcing the Board's distinction as a separate and different

fannish space. For instance, noting that families and relationships have been

---

[64] Tweet located at: https://twitter.com/ThatKevinSmith/status/19010084603
[65] Tweet located at: https://twitter.com/ThatKevinSmith/status/19013228915
[66] Tweet located at: https://twitter.com/ThatKevinSmith/status/19376861717

founded on the Board, Smith feeds into the use of history as a semiotic

resource, as well as the dominant context of sociality that shapes Boardie

experience as made evident through Sections Two and Three. In doing so,

Smith does not frame the Board as a space in which to exclusively discuss

himself, View Askew, or related texts, but rather as a social hub – making clear

his awareness that the community is not necessarily focused on him as the

primary cultural commodity. Yet interestingly, in referencing a time "Before

Twitter", Smith makes it clear that the Board is not a space that is to

necessarily be regarded as competition for his attention. Rather, Twitter is still

his currently favoured space for producer-audience interaction, but the Board

occupies another role for Kevin Smith fans. Although this advances Smith's

supposed "abandonment" of the Board, it makes clear that he still values the

Board's ability to foster meaningful connections in his name. The pride Smith

demonstrates, and his affirmation of Boardie practices, hints at why Boardies

maintain a commitment to Smith's authority; for his commitment to

perpetuating the fan culture is based on an affection and nostalgia for the close

relationships he and other have built in the space.

The Emergency Backup Board: Resistance

In contrast, the 2012 closure marks the dissolution of communal identity, and

an explicit condemnation of Smith's engagement with Boardies.

Demonstrating a move from acquiescence to outright resistance, the fan

response to the 2012 closure marks an evolution in Boardies' attitudes to

Smith's involvement in the fan culture. Rather than taking any collective

responsibility, the latter EBB FAQ placed blame squarely with Smith's friend

Bryan Johnson.[67]

Rather than being coy, inviting Boardies to seek information about the

closure for themselves, here conjecture on the EBB posited that the Board

closure came as a result of the furore surrounding Johnson banning users for

insulting his appearance, demeanour, and behaviour on television series *Comic*

Book Men and podcast *Tell 'Em Steve-Dave!*. Following allegations of inherent

sexism in the television programme (Grant 2012; Pantozzi 2012), Johnson was

thought to be representative of further inflammatory opinions made by the

Comic Book Men cast during a retaliatory podcast episode. User A used the

2012 EBB FAQ thread to explain how they understood the Board closure to

have occurred:

> **wait what happened?**
>
> the VA board is gone, i'm afraid. because i … was mean to bryan
> johnson.
>
> **no, really, what happened?**
>
> i'm totally serious, he got his feewings huwt because i pointed out that
> he is mean to ming, does not have gainful employment and has a long
> beard. he banned me (and [User H]) for "repeatedly insulting board
> member bryan johnson." he had not posted since 2010, and admitted on
> twitter he never would have seen the posts if not for "a friend" telling
> him.

---

[67] Johnson is a childhood friend of Smith's who has used Smith's producorial influence to
forge a media career for himself. Beginning with cameo appearances in Smith's films *Mallrats*,
Chasing Amy, and *Dogma*, Johnson subsequently wrote, directed, and co-starred in *Vulgar*
(2000), a Smith-financed venture. Smith's backing of Johnson was disparagingly
acknowledged by *Variety* critic Dennis Harvey in his review of the film, noting 'Final credit
thanks exec producer Kevin Smith, "without whom I'd still be working at the car wash and you
wouldn't be reading this." Need more be said?' (2000) Since this time, Johnson has become
relatively more successful (though apparently still reliant on Smith's support;) as the co-host of
SModcast Network podcast *Tell 'Em Steve-Dave!* (2010-), and latterly being featured on AMC
reality series *Comic Book Men* (2012-), a programme following the employees of Smith's Red
Bank-based comic book store Jay and Silent Bob's Secret Stash.

they are claiming i went after johnson's "appearance" which while technically true, i feel does me a disservice. i chose to mock things he has total control over – and for that matter, appears to take great and intentional pride in – his beard and disheveled manner, his rudeness, meanness, and the layabout nature that has been gleefully highlighted on the show. i did not attack anything about him that was given to him by providence or that he would have any reason to be ashamed of. he likes his beard, i mock his beard. why would that bother him, if he likes it? and if he doesn't like it, then... shave it? *shrug* …
was i rude to bryan johnson? oh yes. do i feel bad about it? uhmmmm no. (EBB post, 06/03/12)

In a stark contrast to the 2010 FAQ post, here User A documents the reasoning for the Board closure in explicit detail, taking pride in assuming sole responsibility for instigating a conflict. Despite her previous call for communal humility, User A appears to relish the sole role she played in the Board closure, listing and annotating 'a fairly comprehensive list of mean things i said'. In doing so, User A demonstrates that her conceptualisation of Boardie identity has shifted from communal to individual participation. The difference in circumstance here is that User A has explicitly made a stance (by proxy) against Smith, and in disregarding Smith's authority, he ceases to be a symbolic figure that binds the community together.

Yet an active dismissal of Smith from Boardies was not necessarily a one sided process, as in contrast to 2010 when the Board was still accessible as a social hub, here all functionality was stripped away, never to return. Figure 26 shows the front page of the Board during "normal" moments: Forums, subforums, active users, and statistics are all visible. In contrast, Figure 27 shows the same page as it appeared in 2012 (and as it remains currently). There is no community content of any kind, nor even an error message or announcement signalling that the forum is closed. The most prominent graphic

is an (out of date) banner advertisement for *Comic Book Men*, an ever-present reminder of the conflict between Boardies and one of the programme's stars. The barren frontpage is emblematic of Smith's response to the closure, where in contrast to 2010 where he publicly acknowledged that the Board was out of commission,[68] here he notably maintained silence on the topic.
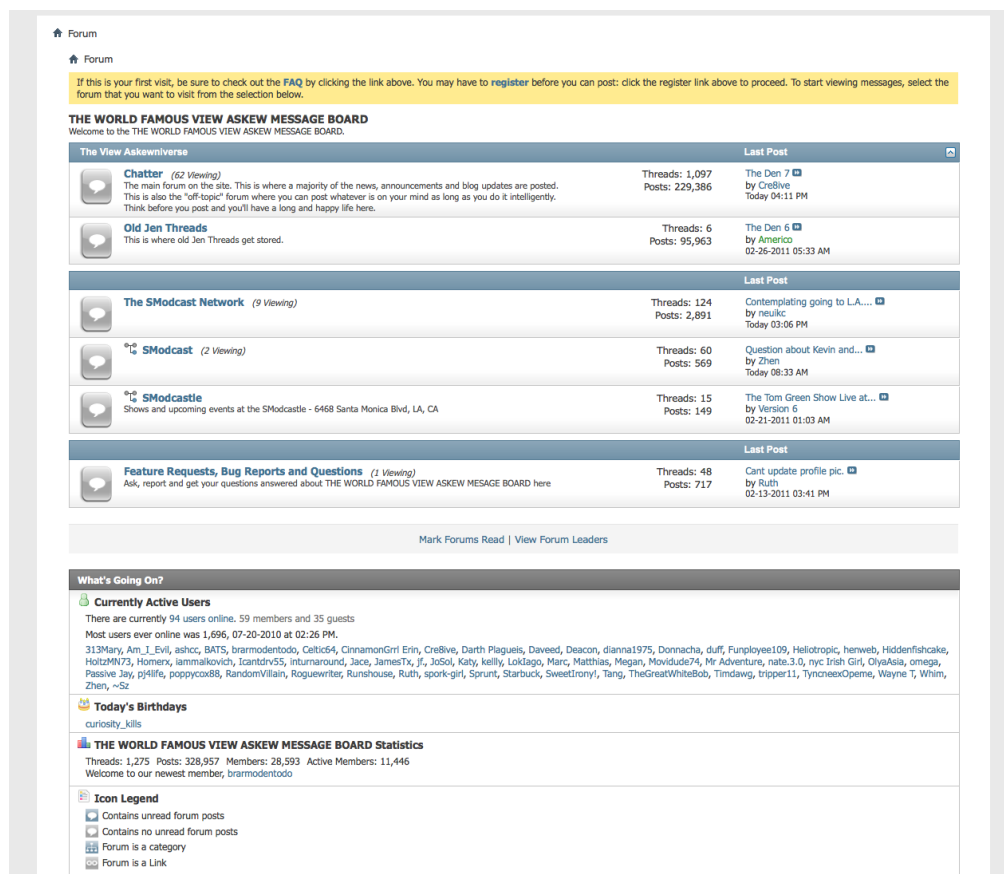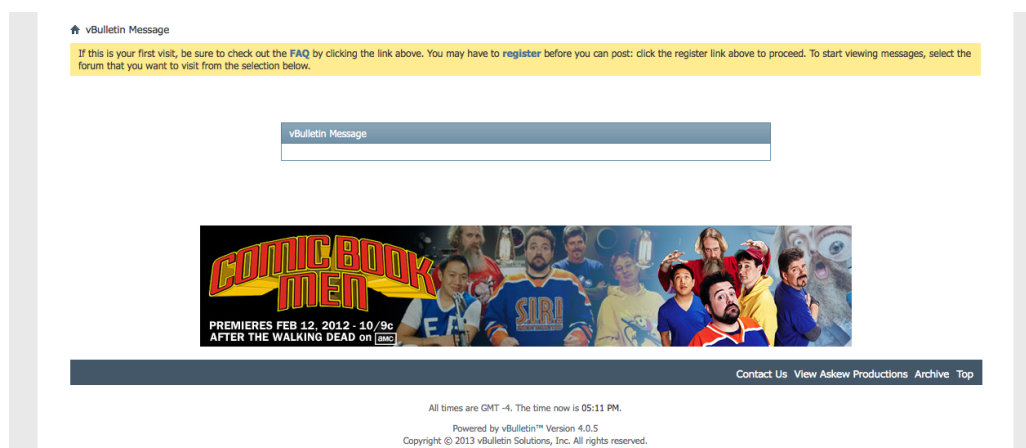

Figure 26: The active Board front page in 2011.

---

[68] Noting that '[the] Board'll be back. Just needs to be thoroughly washed. In tomato juice.' (Smith, Twitter, 11/07/10) https://twitter.com/ThatKevinSmith/status/18273739522, https://twitter.com/thatkevinsmith/statuses/1 8272128410

Figure 27: The dormant Board in 2013.

With no explicit attempt at reconciliation from either side, the complete loss of

the Board allowed for a seeming "clean break", where Boardies could stop

treating the EBB as a temporary shelter, and instead embrace it as a new online

home. Here then, the EBB – originally founded by User A – becomes subject

to similar patterns of ownership as the Board, as can be seen by the (albeit

tongue-in-cheek) set of rules listed:

> **what are the rules here?**
>
> it seems the drama is subsiding, and once we're sure another flare-up
> isn't imminent, this board will be a private place. anyone can register,
> and if you are real with your intentions, even if they are not popular or
> complimentary, you should feel free to express yourself. we will not be
> fucked with. if you hate [User A], and you feel the need to say so, by all
> means. if you just want to mess with people, grow up. preferably
> elsewhere.
>
> **is this a den of hatred/a place to slag off c-and-lower-list
> celebrities?**
>
> not intentionally. will it happen? yeah probably sometimes. is that the
> point of this? no.
>
> **is this a place of fairness, positivity, rainbows and sausages?**

> no, this is the domain of [User A]. there is no pretense of civility, fairness, equity, freedom of speech or anything else. my whims fluctuate wildly and you are all subject to them. (EBB post, 06/03/12)

Although it would be foolish to attempt to read too much into the rules cited here – User A is certainly inflecting her post with sarcasm – what is notable is that there are explicit rules being set, and in comparison to the implied directives of the Board, the post is revelatory in how Boardie activity will now be regulated in the absence of Kevin Smith. In a stark contrast to User A's 2010 clarification that 'i don't really plan on making changes that make this place look any move lived-in than it has to be, because i'm hoping the real board will be back before we even know it,' (EBB post, 11/07/10) the EBB in 2012 is set up to be a long term communal space.

The "good" social agenda is set out straight away, with an emphasis on inclusiveness, openness, and free speech which welcomes users being "real" – again in this context referring to the presentation of a "genuine" persona free from "performance", as has been continually valued by Boardies. Explicit anti-Smith (or related) sentiment is not encouraged, but it is clear that it may be expected at times; although civility is valued, direct opposition to the prior experiential context of acquiescence will not be obstructed.

It is interesting to question the extent to which Kevin Smith fandom will be important to the EBB in the future. User A point towards the EBB eventually being private, and despite the fact that 'anyone' can register, knowledge of the forum's existence would most likely be a result of being connected to the Board in some way. To be a Boardie on the EBB, then, is to seemingly be a participant in a culture which encompasses a generalised

community of social activity, where any shared heritage as a Kevin Smith fan is now completely peripheral to communal experience – Smith no longer occupies a position as a cultural commodity, and communal values are built upon social and cultural capital with no stake in any fan culture.

Gatson and Zweerink note that when the "official" Bronze ceased to operate, 'That sentiment and stance of claiming Bronzer as an identity, a place, is now even more ambiguous … It is now a more amorphous identity, rather than one necessarily in contention.' (2004: 233) This thesis has previously demonstrated that Boardie identity is a more malleable facet of Kevin Smith fandom, yet despite this the end of the Board demonstrates it is not as "shapeless" as Gatson and Zweerink may pose. Rather, in staying true to an emphasis on sociality, Boardies are able to maintain their identity and community in other spaces. For some this will be on the EBB, for others it will be through sustained backchannels such as Facebook or offline hockey games. Although users may now be fragmented across online geographies, their common emphasis on sociality ensures that Boardie identity consistently remains in negotiation with individuals' notions of community, regardless of the extent of Kevin Smith's involvement.

Beyond Fandom?

This thesis began by positing that a recontextualisation of the "1992 moment" in fan studies was perhaps warranted. The assumed nature of fans and their activities – 'Analysis, interpretation, and speculation, building a community through shared texts and playfully appropriating them for their own ends'

(Clerc 1996: 51) – framed my research as one which presented a fan community in opposition to such practices, and where at times the very term "fan" may be considered problematic. The primary subjects of the project – more frequently referred to as Boardies – have demonstrated less tangible productivities than one might expect a fan culture to produce (Winge 2006; Busse and Hellekson 2006), and when semiotic, enunciative, or textual productivities have been identifiable, they function less as a display of fandom, and more for the benefit of social capital.

This emphasis on sociality throughout – at times to the detriment of the "original" fan object – is striking when one considers the way in which both Smith and Boardies have previously been keen to laud the relationship between fans and a communicative, media-literate producer. Yet Smith's role has diminished over the duration of this research: whilst my initial questionnaire and interviews were designed to elicit talk from Boardies about their affection for Smith, it was their affection for each other which became the most prominent theme in their cultural experience. As a result, although Boardies' relationship with Smith was frequently invoked as being a prevailing feature, the ties now appear to be more symbolic. Keeping this bond as a base for interaction allows Boardies to occupy a space beyond fandom – where their culture may be outwardly defined as fannish, but is ultimately more concerned with the interpersonal connections the culture itself has forged.

This has meant that Boardie culture cannot be solely delineated by any specific space or practice – either on- and offline. Although the View Askew Message Board has been the primary site of the culture, backchannels of communication have allowed for the proliferation of community beyond the

(originally defined) primary webspace for Kevin Smith fans. Breaking down barriers between "real" and "virtual", Boardies ensure that the boundaries of their culture remain open, and this openness allows the community to thrive through both technical and conceptual irruptions – such as when a webspace may cease to exist, or when conflict may emerge between members (including Smith). The social capital accrued through both on- and offline interactions is a powerful currency which keeps the economy of the culture running.

The methodological and ethical concerns of this thesis – particularly when researching "excluded" audiences – have made clear that ultimately it may not be suitable to describe Boardies simply as "fans". The presence of a multitude of others who would similarly share that label means that the "common knowledge" approach to who or what a fan is (Hills 2002) should perhaps be rethought. Boardies are just one example of a group we might label this way, but this thesis has demonstrated that their cultural practice goes beyond just the 'regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text' (Sandvoss 2005: 8). The future study of fan cultures should consider that "what a fan does" does not necessarily have to fit one description: fans and their practices are malleable, fluid and ever changing.

Appendices

Appendix One

Preliminary Survey

1. Real name
2. Board username*
3. Age*
4. Location
5. Alternative username for use in this study
6. Email address for follow-up questions or interview
7. When did you first sign up to The Board?
8. What brought you to begin posting or lurking there?
9. When posting, are you aware of the history of The Board?
10. How long after joining did you feel part of a community?
11. Is the "View Askew Fan Community" dependent on The Board to exist?
12. Do you post on any other online forums?
13. If yes, do you see your actions on The Board as different from other forums?
14. Do you think being a fan of Kevin Smith is different to being a fan of someone/something else?
15. What aspects of Kevin's media output are you a fan of the most?
16. How important to you is Kevin's communication with fans?
17. How would you feel towards Kevin if he refused to interact with fans at all?
18. Is there any other information you wish to include that you feel may be relevant to this study?

* = Required question

Appendix Two

General Email Interview One

Sent 13ᵗʰ July 2010

Hello all,

I have recently begun the second part of my research process – going through the questionnaire that you all kindly filled out, and individually emailing you with follow up questions. However, as I started to do this, Sunday's closure of The Board has led me to want to explore people's thoughts and feelings "on the record", and I would really appreciate you taking the time out to answer a few questions/share your feelings. I know many of you have found other online spaces and have discussed your thoughts there, and if you are not prepared to express yourself anew, I welcome copying and pasting of sentiments expressed elsewhere – anything would be greatly appreciated.

It's been a tumultuous few days to be a Boardie, and in a way, I feel exploitative to be sending this email, as my personal feelings towards the potential permanent closure of The Board far outweigh my professional ones. However, it would be remiss of me not to include this event in my research, as I feel the response I have experienced is demonstrative of real "community" in action. I believe this whole event has raised answers to the question of how a community is established when the previous parameters that define that community are eradicated.

However, those are just my thoughts, and I would really like to hear from you, so here are a few questions to get you thinking:

How did you find out about The Board lockdown? Did you strive to let anybody else know?

Have you found a replacement or interim online space? If so, how did you find out about it?

If you've not sought a replacement forum, why?

Do you hold any one person/s accountable for the lockdown?

Kevin and (particularly) Jen are posters on The Board. My research will touch upon how despite their apparent "celebrity" status, they both frequently articulate themselves as regular, fellow Boardies. Would you agree with this, and would you say your behaviour towards them reflects your dis/agreement? Does it create a problem to Kevin and Jen's everyday Boardie status if they have the power to shut the community down?

Thanks again everyone, let's hope The Board is back soon,
Tom

Appendix Three

General Email Interview Two

Sent 20th December 2010

Dear all,

I hope you are well during this Christmas season and things aren't getting too hectic! I had a few more questions to ask relating to my research, but before I get to that, thought I'd give you an update on what I've been doing the last few months.

Since my research trip to Red Bank in August I've been doing a lot of thought about the nature of my project and the shape it's going to take. To that end, since September I've been doing small bits of writing for my thesis supervisors, essentially summing up the trip and the kinds of research issues I felt it raised (more of that later). The writing of my project has taken somewhat of a back seat recently though, as I began teaching for the first time (I loved it!), and also had a number of side projects on the go (such as a journal issue on comedy and fandom: http://www.criticalstudiesintelevision.com/index.php?siid=13893; and a recently published article on my Kevin Smith research methodology: http://flowtv.org/2010/12/embracing-the-overly-confessional/).

So how has the research trip changed the way I'm thinking about things? Well, I'm now really interested in the nature of the term "community", and how Kevin Smith fans may fit into the Kevin Smith fan community or not (i.e. are non-Boardies part of a community?).

I'm also keen to explore the nature of off-Board communication. During the trip, whilst I was meeting many fantastic people I kept thinking how the experience would surely make me use the Board more. However, this hasn't happened – if anything, I've used the Board less and stuck more to other avenues such as Facebook and Twitter. So I am interested to see how many of you think community extends beyond the Board.

So if you have the time (particularly at this crazy time of year), would you mind sparing 10 minutes to have a think about the following questions and get back to me? (Apologies in advance if you already have in some capacity):

1. What is the View Askew fan community?
2. Are all Kevin Smith fans part of the community? If so/not, why?
3. If you talk to other Boardies/VA fans away from the Board:
    a. Why?
    b. How (if at all) does this communication differ from on-Board?
    c. Does off-Board communication affect community? Is it an exclusive phenomenon?

That's it! If you want clarification/expansion on anything please let me know.

Thanks for your continued support, and I hope you have a fantastic holiday season and New Year.

Best,
Tom

Appendix Four

Semi-structured Live Interviews

Conducted 30th July - 3rd August 2010

1. How would you define the View Askew fan community?
   - How do off-Board activities factor into this definition?
   - Is "community" altered by on- or offline activities?
   - Has your definition changed over time?

2. Do you attempt to maintain community in any way?
   - How? If not, why?
   - Who are the community leaders?

3. When did you first join the Board?
   - How have you integrated yourself into the community?
   - Can you explain this process?
   - Was this natural or easy for you to do?

4. What was the first meetup you went to?
   - Expand on the experience.
   - Why go to a meetup rather than just post?
   - How did it compare to Board activity?

5. Why have you met up with other fans at this event?
   - Difference between official and unofficial fan events?
   - What about fans who aren't Boardies?

6. Is Kevin Smith still required for the community to exist?
   - How does the extent of Smith's involvement affect meetups?
   - How does it affect online interactions?
   - Is Smith's communication with fans important to you?

7. How often do you communicate with Boardies away from the Board?
   - Online?
   - Offline?
   - Why do you feel the need to leave the Board?

Appendix Five

Email and Live Interview Participants

Participant	Email Interview	Live Interview
artistjim	13/07/10	
babydoll	08/07/10 23/07/10 28/09/10	
Backtoblack	13/07/10	
bentcountershaft	20/07/10	
BODaciousCyn		03/08/10
Bryan		02/08/10
Cathy	13/07/10	
CinnamonGrrl Erin	16/07/10	
Darth Predator	14/07/10	
Dianae	22/12/10	
Duff	13/07/10	30/07/10
Duyn		03/08/10
FiveStatesAway		01/08/10
Haar	26/10/10	31/07/10
ima_dame		03/08/10
Johnboy	14/07/10 18/07/10	
JordanFromJersey		02/08/10
KTCV	21/12/10 21/12/10	
Ming		02/08/10
Rocco	20/12/10	
Roguewriter	13/07/10 22/12/10	01/08/10
Ruth	14/07/10 21/12/10 22/12/10	
Silent Snootch	15/07/10	03/08/10
Silirat		02/08/10
slithybill	19/07/10	02/08/10
Speedy	13/07/10 21/12/10 22/12/10	
Syracuselaxfan		01/08/10
Talos	10/07/10 14/07/10 28/09/10 21/12/10 22/12/10	
Tears In Rain		02/08/10
TheManWhoLikesSMod	13/07/10	02/08/10

	23/01/11	
[User wished to be kept anonymous]	14/07/10	

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