The Intra- and Inter-Sub-Community Dynamics of Fandom

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This project was inspired by observations made during a project conducted in the Fall semester of 2013, which explored the motivations young women had for engaging in fandom behavior. This behavior includes reading and writing stories (fan fiction), creating digital or traditional art (fan art), writing analytical essays about past and possible future events (meta and speculation), and engaging with other fandom members, whether actively in discussions or passively by sharing fan content on blogs. These behaviors are all related to or inspired in some way by a particular media text, and tend to focus on some combination of plot, characters, and themes of the text. I spoke to a number of young women during that project who were very different from each other in terms of age, nationality, culture, background, and membership to particular fandoms but were all profoundly alike in the appeal fandom behavior held for them. Whether they enjoyed writing and talking about fan fiction or looking at fan art and passing on meta to their friends, whether they wanted to focus only on the character relationships in the first season of a show or speculate about the newest season’s finale months before it aired, each fan engaged in fandom behavior because, in one way or another, it was deeply fulfilling and personally meaningful to them. For many of them, it was an outlet to express themselves about things they cared about and often a way to analyze themselves by identifying with and deconstructing or exploring a character or ideas in the text. It was also incredibly important to them to have found a community of like-minded people with whom to engage in this process without being shamed or mocked.
As I was noticing these patterns that lay under the surface differences in these fans’ behavior, I began to wonder about the effect this phenomena had on the dynamics of a single fandom. As I said, most of the fans were primarily involved in different fandoms, but a number of them were involved to some degree in a few that overlapped. I was struck by how differently they engaged with the text, varying in their choice of fandom behavior but also drastically in their opinions of elements of the text. In my own experiences in fandoms, I have seen people become incredibly close over shared interpretations of an aspect of a text and others come to furious, hate-filled blows over differing interpretations. I hypothesized that both of these forms of interaction were predicated on the same type of personal investment that characterized general fandom behavior. This project was designed to investigate how the fandom of one particular text is differentiated into sub-communities based on different interpretations of an element of a media text. To examine this idea, I analyzed how individuals developed their own interpretations of the chosen text, looked at how these interpretations contributed to creating unity or discord with other fandom members, and explored how that unity-discord manifests in the dynamics of the fandom community and in its relationship with the media creators.

I chose to focus on the fandom for the TV show *Supernatural*, as it was one that came up frequently during my previous project. *Supernatural*, created by Eric Kripke, premiered on the WB Network (now the CW) in September of 2005. It follows two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, as they face increasingly difficult battles with ghosts, monsters, demons, and other supernatural forces, assisted by allies, both human and otherwise, they recruit on their journey. The show begins
with Dean enlisting Sam's help searching for their father, who has disappeared on a hunt for the supernatural thing that killed their mother when they were children, and follows them as they find themselves the unwilling players in an increasingly complex plan of epic proportions. *Supernatural* is a genre show like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and other sci-fi/fantasy shows, and roughly follows a “monster-of-the-week” formula common in such shows, though in later seasons it shifts to focus almost equally on myth arcs that span multiple episodes and across seasons.

Themes of home, family, destiny, and choice dominate the show. Kripke particularly cites *The X-Files* as an inspiration for *Supernatural* and has also talked about the influence of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* on the themes of the show and on the characters, Sam and Dean. The Winchesters were created to echo hero types like Luke Skywalker and Han Solo, respectively, though Kripke noted that their actors brought unique dimension to these archetypes.

"We were really looking for Sam to be empathetic, kind, and likeable, and really the audience surrogate and that required a really unique likeability. For Dean, we were looking for devil-may-care, charismatic, a little rough around the edges, a little edgy, says things that are not always the kindest thing, as long as they’re funny. And Jared [Padalecki] and Jensen [Ackles] both just so inhabited those parts, and then proceeded to blow us away with how dimensionalized they were. For Jensen, the level of emotion and totally flawed, screwed-to-hell psyche that he brings to Dean, we really are enamored with. This idea that on the surface here's this Han Solo devil-may-care persona, but when you really scratch beneath the surface, you see that anyone who has that persona has it because they are just so messed up, and that you would have to be so screwed up and damaged to be the person who always jumps first off a cliff. So, he really brought Dean to life in a really three-dimensional way, and Jared did the same thing with Sam. Yes, Sam was likeable, and the audience surrogate and all the things he was supposed to be, but also angry, and disaffected, and, at times, hilariously funny, loyal, and despondent. He brought in all of these different colors that have really brought these characters to life, which I think is probably very rare for a genre show to have--characters as dimensionalized as ours--and I’m really proud of it."  
(Kripke, 2008)

The show was originally imagined with the Winchesters as journalists who facilitated the exploration of the real story – the particular monster of the episode.
However, Kripke chose to shift the focus to the brothers themselves, instead using the monsters to explore their family dynamics and inner selves (Kripke, 2008). This focus on the characters and their relationships over the mythical elements of the world they live in sets *Supernatural* apart from most monster-of-the-week shows and shows on its network, and has inspired a devoted fan following (Larsen and Zubernis, 2013). A small but dedicated percentage of the fandom, which has over 10,000 members, has been watching the show since its earliest seasons, and a great number of this group even from the first episode. The show continued to draw fans over the years, with an unprecedented influx of viewers during its eighth season in 2012 (Fandometrics, 2014). Its tenth season will premiere in October of 2014.

*Supernatural*'s focus on emotional themes and the inner lives of its characters has encouraged fans to do the same, many citing particular characters or relationships as what drew them into the show and fandom. This kind of investment is highly emotional and personal, which increases the general intensity of fan investment, both in isolation and group settings. As such, I believed that themes across fandoms would be particularly noticeable in the *Supernatural* fandom.

The *Supernatural* fandom was also a natural choice as I was personally familiar with it. As I stated, many fans from all fandoms feel their fan communities are something of a safe haven from ridicule and scorn they often face from outsiders, who do not understand the interest in a work of fiction, and can be particularly disdainful of such investment in a TV show, of all mediums. My insider status afforded me a level of immediate trust that would be very difficult for an outsider to attain from many of my participants, who were reassured by my
familiarity with the space and by the fact that I was not put off by their passion, even if I did not share their exact opinions of the show.

I chose to use different interpretations of Dean Winchester to begin the process of identifying the various sub-communities of the *Supernatural* fandom, diagramming their relationships, and investigating the underlying explanations for their particular dynamics. I did not limit conversations with participants to Dean, instead using this question as a starting point and way of orienting our conversations about the space and as a comparative tool between fans. By talking about the preferences of individual fans – whether they loved him, tolerated him, liked him in the context of a particular relationship, or hated him – in reference to a common topic, I was able to construct a comprehensive model of the whole space.

The first few weeks of the project were spent familiarizing myself with fandom scholarship, particularly that of Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, Kathryn Larsen, Lynn Zubernis, Kristina Busse, Karen Hellekson, and Henry Jenkins. These theories, and particularly the fandom ethnographies, informed how I reached out to fans, how I structured my interview guide, how I chose to conduct my interviews, and later helped me make sense of the data I had gathered. I chose the blogging site tumblr as the platform to contact fans through, as its design has made it very conducive to fan interactions and so is one of the most popular spaces for fandoms. Tumblr users can post their own written work, art, or videos to their “dashboard” where they can also see the content from other blogs that the users have “followed.” Their own followers see the original content users upload in addition to content from other bloggers they have has “reblogged.” This user-friendly, incredibly
interactive layout facilitates easy access to content that suits one’s taste and is a very useful format for fandoms to share content of all sorts. I used the site to reach out to *Supernatural* fans both by making a general call for participation through a blog post and by seeking out specific fans I knew were part of particular sub-communities of the fandom. I asked these fans to consider participating themselves and sharing the project with their communities by reblogging the post. People then self-selected themselves for participation, completing a preliminary survey of basic background information, their experiences with fandom behavior in general and with the *Supernatural* fandom, and opinions of Dean and the show, to help me choose a representative sample of fans. The fandom is primarily female, and though it ranges rather comprehensively in age from 15 to 60, the most active sub-group is between 18 and 30 (Fandometrics, 2014). Accordingly, out of my 18 participants, six were 24, two each 23, 22, 21, and 20, and one 18. Three participants were outliers who asked if they could participate despite their age, which I allowed to give dimension to the pool – two were women, ages 39 and 57, and one, the only man in the study, was 31. I conducted 2-3 semi-structured interviews with each participant over the course of July, each lasting approximately two hours.

I initially believed it might be difficult to draw information out of my participants, but found them all to be incredibly insightful and willing to share their experiences very early on. This can be attributed to the trust that sharing fandom experiences generated, but also to the fact that we were discussing topics these fans cared about deeply, had thought about a lot, and had not often had the opportunity to share before. The space grew more complex with each person I talked to, and
yielded some fascinating insight into the motivations behind the interpretations that populated the fandom and the relationships between the fans who supported each interpretation. Based on my experiences during my last project, I had anticipated about 12 pages of transcription for each session, but each interview resulted in over 30. I took advantage of the participants’ willingness to share by pursuing discussion of as many aspects of their experience and the fandom as we could, but, given the timeline for this project, quickly realized I would not be able to analyze or process all of the complexities of the space suggested by this data. I have focused on crafting a working model of the general map of the fandom’s sub-communities, illuminating the contributing factors in their peaceful and violent interactions, and exploring the implications of these dynamics on their relationship with Supernatural’s creators and plan to develop this outline of the space through future summer research, for my interdisciplinary thesis, and in graduate work.

I will start by outlining the major sub-communities of the space, differentiated by their interpretations of Dean and other elements of the show, and then explore the dynamics between these groups. I go on to postulate some underlying reasons behind the more caustic conflicts in the space, and detail the effect of these ideological differences on the relationship the fandom has with the creators of the show.

Through their descriptions of their own sub-communities and their perspectives on what other groups made up the fandom, I was able to break the Supernatural fandom down into groups named for the aspect of the show the fans that populate it hold most dear [see diagram]. Population size generally decreases
radiating out from the center, while fan perspectives grow from moderate to intense along the same axis, though not equivalently along each line. Sam Girls, Dean Girls, Brothers Fans and Wincest (romantic relationship between Sam and Dean) Fans are the oldest groups, naturally preceding Castiel (Cas) Girls, since Cas, an angelic character who becomes an ally to the Winchesters, did not appear on the show until season 4. The Destiel Fans followed, characterized by being interested in a romantic relationship between Dean and Castiel. Anti-Fans had been present to some degree preceding Cas’s introduction, but became a dominant group in reaction to his presence and popularity, and especially association with Dean. A subset of the Sam Girls developed over the years as certain fans (Extreme Sam Girls) began to resent the way the show’s narrative and the fandom treated Sam, particularly Extreme Dean Fans. This latter group in turn intensified in their defense of Dean’s actions and character in response. There does not seem to be a particular pattern to the growth of the groups of fans who are interested in the show’s structure or mythology, beyond a steady increase as the show gained general popularity over the years.

*Supernatural* is oriented around the experiences of the Winchester brothers, and so it logically follows that the most dominant groups in the fandom are identifiable by their affinity for Sam, Dean, or the brothers’ relationship as its own entity. “The whole dichotomy between them, the basic difference between their personality types, and them being two different hero types – it really encourages you to pick a side,” (Nat, 7/14/14). Those who care for one brother over the other tend to view their relationship somewhere from slightly flawed to unhealthy to
downright dangerous. Those who like their relationship, in spite of or even for its flaws, tend to have a preference for one brother or the other, but it is usually slight and subordinate to their enjoyment of their relationship.

Though the majority of fans express a fondness for Sam, a recent survey suggests that more fans identify more strongly as fans of Dean (Fandometrics, 2014). Despite Kripke’s attempts to set up Sam as the audience surrogate, many fans found that even by the second season, Sam was more likely to be the subject of the “myth arc” (the supernatural elements of the season) while Dean had an “emotional arc.” With this structure, which has been described as “being about Sam but told from Dean’s perspective,” (Nat, 7/14/14) the narrative facilitates accessibility to Dean’s side of events, and a number of fans cite this as a contributing factor to his popularity. Despite this fact, Sam has garnered a large and passionate fanbase. In tune with Kripke’s intentions for Sam, some are drawn to Sam for being a particular hero type they like. Penny compared him to Harry Potter as a character who has a lot of strength but retains a certain gentleness (6/26/14) and Helene likened him to Frodo as someone who is “thrust into being a hero and not that excited about it,” and discussed how she enjoyed watching this lead him to dealing with a bit of darkness and overcoming it (6/28/14). Some are also drawn to his personality, as Sam is generally a kind, conscientious, and thoughtful person. This often influences how his fans feel about certain choices Sam makes in later seasons, for they see his quite literal path to hell paved with truly good intentions. Sam’s polite and respectful attitude is quite different than Dean’s, which is described by many fans as brash, loud, and rude. Despite these qualities, many Sam fans have a certain
affection for Dean’s womanizing and wise-cracking, but are much more drawn to
Sam’s genuineness. In addition, these fans often identify very strongly with Sam,
either concerning his personality or life circumstances. “You know, my family didn’t
like me moving away to college,” Diana disclosed. “They didn’t like me staying away,
they didn’t like me pursuing a masters. They didn’t like me pursuing a career as
opposed to a crap job. They had some very strange ideas involving class, and career
versus job, and I don’t understand it. And so I saw Sam’s struggles and... well, my
family has this idea of the self that I should be, too, and I definitely related to that,
right away,” (6/26/14). Penny found a similar solidarity with Sam, discussing how
seeing Sam deal with being soulless helped her overcome a particularly hard bout of
depression: “...Nothing really mattered to me anymore, I couldn’t feel anything any
more, I think I was just like, emotionally a zombie for a little, and I guess I just felt a
little soulless for a while. And that gave me, like, the language that I needed to kind
of talk about how I was feeling and sort of start dealing with it and coming up with
solutions,” (6/25/14). This strong emotional connection with Sam often makes it
particularly hard for these fans to tolerate how Dean and fans of Dean treat Sam and
the choices he makes. “They see Sam abandoning his family – okay, well, I moved
away from my family, are you saying I deserve to have my face smashed into a
wall?” (Diana, 6/26/14). Many Sam Girls struggle to reconcile their anger over
Sam’s treatment with the affection they hold onto for Dean. This is exacerbated by
the fact that they are often likely to see both brothers as contributing to their
negative relationship, and so, though they are more personally bothered by their
negative effects on Sam, they are hesitant to place blame for particularly damaging interactions solely on one brother or the other.

There are some Sam Girls who acknowledge that both Sam and Dean are responsible for their negative relationship, but feel it is still wrong to pardon Dean for his treatment of Sam. For many of them, Dean’s give-’em-hell attitude and promiscuity were charming and humorous at first, but they found that faded and soured in the face of his behavior and its consequences for Sam. They often find themselves angry with the narrative and the fans for presenting Dean’s behavior as moral or correct, when to them it is clearly not. Diana notes that fans like her are often irritated by others who try to displace responsibility for events from Dean or deny their immorality. She said, exasperated, “It’s very much a double-standard: the things that Dean does, never mind how the narrative treats it, the fandom bends over backwards to excuse.” This particularly angers some fans when it is achieved by directly ignoring how events really played out. “They tend not to rely on canon to defend Dean. You know, and again, coming at that from the perspective of a masters degree in accountancy, I can point to canon here and here and here to support my point. And it’s not like we [Extreme Sam Girls] don’t get emotional and spew out a string of obscenities sometimes, but base your argument on canon logic first and then descend into that.” (6/26/14)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Dean Girls are usually more like Sam Girls than Extreme Sam Girls in regards to their feelings on the health of the Winchester brothers’ relationship and who is to blame for its negative effects. Many of them also note their similarity to Sam Girls to the extent that they expected to like Sam better
than Dean before they began the show. "When we as a fandom were first introduced to *Supernatural*, we’re brought in with Sam’s point of view, and we’re rooting for him, we want him to go onto college – and that’s something that’s very relatable, leaving your family and going to college. So – especially for the first season, I was definitely, you know, behind Sam," (Anna, 6/13/14). This held true for many fans even when they started watching, as they were often initially annoyed by or only tolerant of his personality and behavior. Stacie laughed, recalling her earlier opinions, "Honestly, I didn’t like Dean at first! I really didn’t! I mean, because he comes across as this – he’s this *jock*, this *bro*, he’s a *woman’s* man, he’s *rude*, he’s *crass*. He thinks he’s the shit you know? And those kind of arrogant people are just so...I just do not wanna deal with them in real life," (6/23/14). Despite this initial disinterest or outright dislike, many found themselves suddenly intrigued by him when certain moments began to suggest that this cocky, immature, womanizing personality was in fact a façade, hiding a much more complex and nuanced character underneath. “You know, he starts out in the pilot with this whole, ‘Hey, no chick flick moments,’ macho thing, and then the series, boom, next episode, immediately starts deconstructing it, and they just dig in and tear down, claw and fang, this wall that he puts around himself and show what’s on the other side. And what’s on the other side is something terrified, damaged, and so empathetic and caring and desperate. And I just kinda sat up and went ‘*woaaaa*, this is someone I need to know more about,” (Nat, 7/14/14). This unexpected depth took many by surprise and intrigued them enough to continue to look for these windows into what they felt was his true character, even when the show was not actively
showcasing it. Many found this rewarding, both because it made the character more interesting and thus the show more enjoyable, but also because they found that they connected very deeply with some of these aspects they found at Dean’s core. A few noted it was cathartic to see Dean process stress and anxiety in ways they felt they could not, and others talked about feeling like they understood on a very personal level how he dealt with guilt or conceived of his place in his family. A notable group of fans identified with Dean as queer people, seeing his façade as masking that part of his identity as well. “I relate to Dean a lot. The way he dealt with his emotions, and his... just everything he went through. It was around that time, I was realizing I was bisexual, and I think I kind of recognized his sort of attitude towards things and the way he acted in certain scenarios, especially sexual ones. I kind of unconsciously tuned into that, because it was just so similar to me,” (Charlie, 6/23/14)

Dean Girls and Extreme Sam Girls find themselves at odds with each other over the content of their interpretations, but looking at their arguments reveals they also conflict with each other over the correct way to derive an interpretation from the show. Extreme Sam Girls are often irritated when certain Dean Girls get angry with them for so bluntly condemning Dean’s behavior. In turn, Dean Girls find it aggravating when these Extreme Sam Girls insist on such hard line interpretations of Dean’s behavior. “There are definitely those that will reject the use of subtext as legitimate. There’s this whole, ‘Oh, you’re just reading too much into it, this is just what you want to be true,” thing. And the extension of that is, if it’s not actually said on screen, then it’s not true, which does a really massive disservice to the text itself, to the scripts, to the acting, to the actors, to everyone involved in this show, because
it’s such a nuanced thing!” (Nat, 7/14/14). These arguments often veer away from the readings themselves and dissolve into virtual shouting and even anonymously sent hate messages if individuals do not make efforts to remove themselves from the altercation. This emotionality is not unexpected, as each party often feels personally attacked when their interpretation is being picked apart, because they often identify so closely with it. However, it obscures an underlying difference that puts these perspectives at odds with each other.

In the same way that the show can be referred to as a text, it can be called a canon, and from that idea has emerged a common, short-hand phrase fans use for validating their own interpretation, “it’s canon.” A common issue between certain fans is that sometimes it’s so short that it obscures the exact ways people are using it. For Extreme Sam Girls, it typically means, “it is clear or obvious that...” while for Dean Girls it means, “it is reasonable or legitimate to say...” The distinction between these two approaches often leads to fans speaking over each other or criticizing each other’s conclusions without fully understanding how the other reached these conclusions or how they are using the text. The second method is derided for twisting elements of the show into what one wants them to say, regardless of what their meaning is more likely to be, and so missing the more obvious story. The first is called out for being equally self-serving for refusing to see beyond the face value of the elements because it serves one’s purposes better not to, and so missing the more complex story. Those who take either approach tend to see its merits over its flaws, and are varyingly inclined to acknowledge the merits of the other approach. It is difficult to say whether being inclined towards one method of textual analysis
naturally leads to a particular interpretation being developed or if people are drawn to an interpretation and develop the best method for defending it, but there seems to be a correlation that is worth further investigation in the future.

Another point of contention in the fandom is over the inclusion of supporting characters, particularly Castiel, in the main story of the show and lives of Sam and Dean. As stated, a number of fans are unhappy with the brothers’ current relationship, as they see it as damaging and limiting for both of them. Many wish for them to have other important relationships in their lives so that they do not drive their relationship into the ground. While for many of these fans, this is as simple as including Cas as a third main character, there are a number of the Dean Girls who see Dean as queer that extend Cas’s inclusion to being in a romantic relationship with Dean. Destiel Fans (Dean + Castiel) see the foundation for this relationship as very strong, though admit it depends on an open reading of canon similar to that of the Dean Girls described above. They also note it actively resists certain cultural habits that code interactions between men, and often feel that rejecting these heteronormative assumptions makes the depth of the relationship quite clear.

This interpretation puts many Destiel Fans fundamentally at odds with another faction of the fandom, Brothers Fans. These are fans who have often been watching the show since its earliest episodes and have developed incredibly strong attachments to what they see as the heart of the show, which is the brothers sticking together through even the most cataclysmic events and holding no one in higher regard than each other. Many of these fans do tend to slightly favor one brother over the other, but ultimately prioritize their bond over everything else. Many are
particularly drawn to the idea of such devotion between two people. “What I love about it is how devoted to the other they are, how they give their lives for each other, how the other always comes first, everything. And it’s funny because I feel like in the early seasons we just kinda see two brothers, brotherly banter, making fun of each other, and then as the show goes on we see a side, like, just how far they’re willing to go to save the other, how closely they keep together,” (Emily, 7/5/14).

They do stress that it’s not the sort of intense relationship they would want in real life, but feel that it should be taken in spirit in the context of the show’s generally heightened circumstances (Satan is literally a regular side character). Some further enjoy this intense fidelity the brothers have to each other as WinchestersFans (Winchester + Incest). This is generally not a form of the brothers’ relationship they want or expect to see realized on the show, but they do feel supported in pursuing this reading in fandom spaces by the show’s emphasis on the brothers’ singular devotion to each other. Almost all BrothersFans see this loyalty as the show’s core and feel it would be a violation of something fundamental about the story to say that it wasn’t. This perspective conflicts with Destiel Fans in particular, but also with all fans who want to see the brothers change their relationship in any way. These different perspectives often lead to fights similar in emotional investment to those discussed earlier, primarily focused on the health of the brothers’ relationship as it currently stands.

These fights can get rather aggressive, but some of the most violent fights that happen are about fans actually asking the show’s creators to incorporate their perspectives into the show’s future episodes. One group of fans is particularly
notorious for opposing this sort of behavior and the perspectives associated with it. They are unusual as a fan group for being defined not by what they like, but by what they don’t like. Appropriately referred to as Anti-Fans, they are a small group of an estimated 100 or so fans who typically started watching the show very early on, care only for Sam and Dean’s relationship, typically support wincest, and actively hate on Destiel and Cas fans, and even on the actor who portrays him and his fans. The majority are not open to discussion with fans who have other opinions, and unlike most fans, who try to maintain a general respect for their opponent even in arguments that make them very angry, often degrade and mock others for the content of their opinions and the ways they support them. Charlie expressed both her agitation with and concern for these fans during our conversations. “I’ve… personally, uh, engaged with anti-fans, and every thing that they post is about invalidating or talking about how much they hate a certain thing. Before the finale had happened, there was a lot of build up and some people wondering if they might actually make Destiel canon, and these haters were, like, flipping out as that built up more, going, ‘Ew, it’s not going to happen, shut up, shut up!’ And they’re so mean, but like, I feel very worried for them, and sad for them. They’ve built an entire world around refusing the existence of something. So it really scared and worries me for them, what would happen if that thing happened! And they were no longer able to refuse it!” (6/23/14).

This idea of this kind of dramatic change on the show has become more than a hypothetical idea recently since, as I stated, certain factions have found it more reasonable to actually ask for particular things to happen on the show. This is again
most obvious among certain Destiel Fans, who want to see the relationship realized on the show. This is something of a break in fandom tradition, where internalized shame often makes fans resistant to drawing attention to themselves and their behavior as these fans are doing. It is also something of a traditional taboo for fans to bring up relationships, especially queer ones, to media creators, but many Destiel Fans see this as something that is already changing and, further, should change. Ellen and I discussed this and she put forth that when this show first started airing, there were fewer queer couples on TV, and it was not the norm to expect to see them. But now, she sees that it is not that unusual and it can even be lucrative for media creators to include representation of marginalized identities, and so she is in favor both of fans asking for representation by “making Destiel canon,” and of the creators listening to feedback from their fans (7/8/14).

Many Brothers Fans react negatively to this idea, usually because they do not see the relationship as substantiated in the text and because they feel it is not their place for fans to influence the direction of the story. “I don't know, I just feel like...the creators made the story, so it’s theirs first and it's really not up to fans to determine what they do with it,” (Denise, 7/11/14). Fans with other opinions counter this position by pointing to certain plot points and character inclusions that only succeeded because of fan support, and argue that the creators are not the only ones to determine the meaning of the story, and so they should not be the only ones who determine its future. These two stances are further complicated when one acknowledges that each supports the goals of fans they are being presented by. Fans who say they do not want media creators to listen to fans are generally happy with
how the show is currently being written, while those who say they should listen
generally are not. As each needs media creators to do what they suggest to achieve
what they want the show to do, it is difficult see any fan as objective on the topic of
creator-fan relationships.

With that being said, some fans across the board simply fear opening the
door to fandom-canon influence as they believe it could be detrimental to each
groups’ integrity and the relationship between them. They feel that since the
fandom is made up of so many different groups, media creators can only fail if they
attempt to openly satisfy what fans are asking for. Either, these fans say, it will
result in pandering to everyone, or prioritizing one group over another – and either
way they will lower the quality of the show and alienate parts or all of the fandom.

In response, some fans point out that this door has already begun to open, as
media creators have starting interacting with fans on twitter and at fan conventions.
Though this has led to some shared understanding between the two, it has also led
to a lot of anger and confusion on both sides. Neither twitter nor conventions lend
themselves to complex conversations, and much is lost in the simplification of
terminology and desires through these forums. It seems clear to some fans that,
though there may be some negatives to a more open relationship of influence
between media creators and their fandom, its apparent inevitability suggests that
efforts should be made to ensure this is as clear and easily facilitated an exchange of
knowledge and ideas as possible.

*Supernatural* will be entering its tenth season, containing its 200th episode, in
October of 2014. This duration is almost unprecedented for a genre show, and its
recent success suggests it could continue for a few more seasons even beyond that, but eventually it will come to an end. With each season, in some cases even each episode, fans from all groups grow more passionate about seeing their vision for the show realized before this termination. As these groups grow in intensity and become increasingly at odds with each other, it seems an impossible task for *Supernatural* to end well and leave its fans happy. Kripke himself seems to have acknowledged this in the last episode he wrote for the show, speaking through the character, Chuck: “Endings are impossible. You try to tie up every loose end, but you never can. The fans are always gonna bitch. There’s always gonna be holes. And since it’s the ending, it’s all supposed to add up to something. I’m telling you, they’re a raging pain in the ass,” (Super-wiki, 2013). Be that as it may, the experiences and perspectives of the fans who participated in this project seem to suggest the value of media creators working to understand the composition of their fandoms as the most fundamental starting point for making these endings easier to manage. This would clarify to them that their fandom is not a homogenous yet impossibly mercurial group but instead a multitude of different groups with different opinions who will be more or less pleased with particular decisions the creators make depending on how well they complement their opinions. Seeing these complexities in their fandoms would also help them understand the investment these fans carry in their interpretations, enabling media creators to more gracefully handle making decisions that go against certain fans’ desires. I do not believe that learning the intricacies and nuances of a fandom is an easy task – if anything, this project, which barely scrapes the surface of a single fandom’s composition, proves it to be incredibly complex –
but it seems clear that initiating the process of learning to navigate the *Supernatural* fandom's sub-communities and their relationships is a wise choice for its creators.

**Interviewee List**


Nat. Personal interview. 7 Jul. 2015; 14 Jul. 2014.


Julia. Personal interview. 11 Jul. 2014.


Works Cited


Works Consulted


