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And the (Fourth) Wall Came Tumbling Down:
The Impact of Renegotiating Fan-Creator Relationships on *Supernatural*

Supernatural was created by Eric Kripke in 2005, who was inspired to create the television show by Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, "monster-of-the-week" shows like *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and the desire to weave American urban myths and folk lore into a cultural mythology. It will be starting its 11th season on October 7th, 2015, and became the longest continually-running sci-fi show in history near the end of its 10th season. Taking as its most basic premise the idea that all monsters are real, *Supernatural* follows brothers Sam (Jared Padalecki) and Dean (Jensen Ackles) Winchester, who have been trained from childhood to be Hunters of all manner of things that go bump in the night by their father, John, after their mother, Mary, is killed by an unidentified evil being. The pilot begins with Dean calling Sam, who had left to attend college, back into the hunting life to help him search for their father, who had gone missing following a lead on Mary's murderer.

As the story unfolds, the Winchesters find themselves at the heart of a conflict of biblical proportions between the forces of destiny and the power of free will. The brothers gain and lose allies along their journey, including their hunting mentor and foster father Bobby Singer (Jim Beaver), the mother-daughter hunting family Ellen (Sa...) and Jo Harvelle (Alona Tal), the AP Student and reluctant Prophet of the Lord Kevin Tran (Osric Chau), the angel Castiel (Misha Collins), the Sheriff and new Hunter Jody Mills (Kim Rhodes), and the nerdy, cheerful, lesbian techie-turned-Hunter Charlie Bradbury (Felicia Day). The show deals with themes of blood versus found family, what it means to be human, and the use of black-and-white versus

grey morality, and regularly illustrates such concepts as the conflict between destiny and free will as a struggle between divine authorship and the Winchesters “ripping up the script,” to “make things up as they go.”

Supernatural is also iconic for its genre-bending and fourth-wall-breaking episodes, in which it demonstrates an awareness of its fans’ presence and investments, and of its own identity as a constructed work of fiction. *The Monster at the End of this Book* is one of the most popular *Supernatural* episodes, in which the Winchesters discover an author named Chuck Shurley (Rob Benedict) has been divinely inspired to write a pulp fiction series called *Supernatural* that chronicles their lives in what Castiel refers to as “The Winchester Gospels.” Chuck apologizes to the Winchesters for particularly traumatic and upsetting incidents in their lives, many of which were Kripke’s way of acknowledging fan complaints about these particular episodes. In another popular episode, *The French Mistake*, Sam and Dean are temporarily transported into an alternate dimension where they find themselves mistaken for the actors Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles on the set of *Supernatural*. The episode parodies the real-life cast’s quirks and relationships with each other and the fans and is cited as a favorite by both.

From early in its run, *Supernatural* inspired a passionate fanbase, drawn to the show for a variety of reasons and expressing this investment in a multitude of ways. In my past research, I explored the different sub-communities of the *Supernatural* fandom, looking at how the ways of deriving meaning from the show and different formulations of this meaning fostered connections between like-minded fans and tension between these different groups.¹ Despite these differences,

fans of all sub-communities are alike in their avid interaction with each other and the show's creators (encompassing writers, directors, producers, members of the crew, and especially actors) on social media platforms like twitter, tumblr, and facebook, and at live conventions, working together to create charities, support each other in fights against mental illness and other personal struggles, and celebrate the show and their relationship with humor and compassion.

These interactions and the meaningful connections that they have inspired have compounded the show's diegetic work eroding the traditional "fourth wall" that separated the creator and audience of media work and defined their relationship. While this has led to a countless number of positive interactions between creators and fans that speak of a reciprocal love and respect for each other, provided opportunities for heartwarming and creative collaboration, and made *Supernatural* a compelling example of postmodern storytelling, there have also been a number of missteps and pitfalls in the renegotiation of this relationship. To extend the metaphor of the fourth wall, right now it is collapsing and, while this has provided fans and creators alike with the opportunity to reach out to each other, people are also being hit by the debris, and left hurt and unsure about how to interact in the space that's been left in the wake of the wall.

As one of the pioneers in this "new frontier," *Supernatural* has been one of the first shows to benefit from successfully negotiating this transition in some ways, but has also modeled some serious mistakes in the ways fans and creators understand each other. The goal of this project was to speak with both creators and fans in order to understand their own hopes, desires, and intentions regarding the

show and the fan-creator relationship, their perceptions of other members of this relationship, and their hopes and fears for the future of “the *Supernatural* phenomenon.”

Understanding the points of resonance and dissonance in these perspectives is the first step towards resolving some of the perennial problems faced in the renegotiation of this relationship, which is something both fans and creators are invested in doing in order to protect and foster the aspects of it they already treasure. In the course of this project, I spoke with four cast members, including Rob Benedict, who played the prophet Chuck Shurley and has become the co-host with another actor from the show, Richard Speight, Jr., of the *Supernatural* conventions, facilitated by Creation Entertainment. Rob’s band, Loudon Swain, has also become the official house band for the convention weekends and a core fixture of the Saturday Night Concerts, put on by the actors for the fans. I also spoke with an employee of Creation Entertainment about the unique quality of the *Supernatural* conventions and the relationship he observes being fostered between the fans and the creators. Additionally, I spoke to 15 fans of the show, including Paul Booth, the associate professor of Media Studies and DePaul University and author/editor of a number of books of fan culture, Dr. Lynn Zubernis and Professor Kathy Larsen, authors of *Fandom at the Crossroads: Celebration, Shame, and Fan/Producer Relationships* and *Fangasm: Supernatural Fangirls*, both of which explore dimensions of the *Supernatural* fandom and phenomenon, and Mark Oshiro, who has been chronicling his experience watching *Supernatural* for the past two years for his blog, *Mark Watches*.

I spoke at length with these participants about their diverse perspectives regarding many aspects of the general topic of fan-creator relationships and the *Supernatural* phenomenon, over Skype primarily but also in person at the Supernatural conventions in DC and Vancouver, yielding about thirty hours of dialogue. For the purposes of this project, I will be focusing on only a few of these topics, but I intend to expand the work presented here in the thesis I will be writing for my interdisciplinary New Media Studies degree and hopefully presenting at the Popular Culture Association National Conference in Seattle this March.

In this paper, therefore, I will be looking at the factors that enabled a relationship to develop between the fans and creators of *Supernatural*, some of the many positive interactions, collaborations, and connections these forums and opportunities have fostered, and a recent example of a collapse in communication and understanding between the creators and fans – (spoilers) the murder of Charlie Bradbury at the end of the most recent season. This conflict epitomizes many of the recurring problems the fans and creators have faced in renegotiating their relationship over the years, and highlights the issues in the content, conduct, and forums of discussion that fans and creators are continually faced with but often unable to fully work past. The fallout from Charlie's death has threatened the positive aspects of the relationship between the fans and creators severely, with some of the creators having retreated from trying to engage with fans and a not insignificant number of fans considering or have already walked away from the show, which has worried many members of both sides who are still invested in salvaging their relationship. This exploration of the positive and negative parts of

the relationship between the fans and creators will conclude with a formative exploration into new avenues to pursue in order to protect and foster the aspects that are valued by members of both sides, and identify and weed out the aspects that consistently cause them strife.

The Road So Far

In order to discuss the unique relationship that has been fostered between the creators and fans of *Supernatural*, it is important to situate the show and this particular fan-creator relationship in the broader context of the media landscape that has evolved over the past few decades. An employee of Creation Entertainment, the company that facilitates the *Supernatural* conventions, provided some insight into how quickly this landscape has changed. “Back in the seventies, when Creation got started, San Diego Comic Con was still being hosted in a hotel, and was really just about comic books. There were maybe three or four conventions of any sort at all in a year, which is nowhere near the scale they’ve reached today.”² Despite their scarcity, conventions were still incredibly appealing as one of the only places “people with interests in these kind of niche things could get together and meet each other, and the creators and stars of comic books and later on of TV shows. That of course changed when the internet came into being.”

The rise of the internet in general, and social media specifically, has had a radical effect on people’s ability to network and transcend a number of traditional boundaries – geographic being the least of which – to connect with people with whom they share deeply personal interests and investments in media and often in

life as well. While it is not a new observation to point out the rate at which media culture has changed in the past few decades, it is crucial to understanding the relationship between the creators and fans of *Supernatural* to recognize how much the landscape has changed in just the past few *years*. When the show premiered on September 13, 2005, YouTube had only been around for seven months, Facebook for a year and a half, and the world was still six months away from Twitter and a year and a half from Tumblr. Fans primarily interacted with each other on message-boards, but their interactions with the creators of the media they were interested in were incredibly limited and one-sided, if they happened at all.

Supernatural's creators were some of the earliest to start using these new platforms to take note of their fans, and not only observe them, but begin to interact with them. Rob Benedict, who played Chuck Shurley in *The Monster at the End of this Book*, recalled being on set for this episode in 2009 and “standing with Misha [Collins] the day after an episode aired. He was checking his twitter, and when I asked why he told me, ‘Well, after an episode airs, fans will write in with all these comments about it.’ And I remember that being kind of a new thing, and actors going, “Oh, wow, this is a thing, we can go and see what people are saying!”³ Many of the cast members have expressed how fulfilling an opportunity it is to see how people react to their work online and at conventions, noting that it brings a quality of live theatre back into their work. While these types of changes were happening across the media spectrum, the actors often note the uniqueness in *Supernatural's* engagement: “I haven’t worked on anything else that has same level of passion that *Supernatural* inspires. And not just in fans – I don’t really see other actors, or even

writers and producers, checking in and interacting with their fans as much as *Supernatural* does.”

When asked what made *Supernatural's* particular fan-creator relationship so unique, many of the people I spoke to this summer agreed that it was the way that reciprocal recognition and appreciation is present at nearly every level of interaction possible, and that it is the ubiquity of this presence and the ways each individual permutation complements and builds on the others that sets *Supernatural* apart from other shows. The show engages thematically with the concept of redefining the authority of the author by linking it to the show's philosophical explorations of destiny and free will, as well as featuring a number of episodes where the Winchesters encounter characters who stand in for real-life fans and creators, allowing the creators the opportunity to acknowledge, poke light fun at, and celebrate both parties, their relationship, and the show itself. The show has even had an episode where the Winchesters stumble into a convention being held for the *Supernatural* books, a nod to the enjoyment both creators and fans have at the real-world conventions. Rob's first convention was right after this episode aired. “I remember walking out on stage... and there was a collective laugh at how much it was *exactly* like what I had just done on the show. Like, down to the shaking hands and the water bottle (laughing). It was kind of surreal, but it also kind of relaxed me, because right away it just felt like the right audience. We were all on the same page.”⁴

At the conventions, fans have the opportunity to get photos and autographs from their favorite actors, as well as attend panels where the actors answer

questions from the fans lined up at the microphone. While many fans quietly share a fear that the actors secretly disdain, pity, or mock them for their excitement and interest, cast members are quick to be clear about how genuinely they enjoy being able to meet the fans and share in their passion. During his panel at the DC convention, Mark Sheppard commented that “people always talk about fandom like its ‘less than,’ like it diminishes people in some way – but it’s the exact opposite, it’s glorious. And its not a burden for any of us to be a part of it, it’s a joy.”⁵ Osric Chau has been very vocal with similar sentiments, and has proven this shared love by joining in the fannish tradition of dressing up like characters of the show for the conventions, and his cosplays have become a highlight and a point of identification for many fans. Actresses Briana Buckmaster and Kathryn Love Newton, both recent additions to the convention circuit, have both expressed an intense excitement at finally being able to engage with the fans at the convention events like the Friday Night Karaoke Parties and the Saturday Night Specials. Travis Aaron Wade, also a new cast member, put the experiences of many cast members into words, saying at the DC convention, “I’ve felt embraced by this fandom. And when someone hugs you, you hug back.”⁶

This idea of proximity is not just a metaphor. The Friday Night Karaoke Parties, hosted by Richard Speight, Jr. and Matt Cohen, are completely free and an opportunity for fans to get up on stage and sing their hearts out with some of the cast, however out-of-tune or hoarse everyone might be by that point in the convention weekend. These nights, and the Saturday Night Concerts where the cast and members of the Creation team perform music live for the fans, always ending

with a rendition from everyone present of “I Get By With a Little Help From My Friends,” exemplify what Rob points to as one of the most appealing aspects of the conventions. “There's a lot of camaraderie across a lot of different traditional boundaries. Fans meet each other and develop these great friendships at the conventions, and what's cool about it is that what we're doing it too. Rich (Speight) and Matt, and all the other cast have become some of my best friends, and most of us never even acted together on the show. So getting something really personally meaningful out of these conventions...that's an experience we all share and understand.”⁷

Interactions between the creators and fans at conventions and online are often fun, silly, light-hearted, emotional, poignant, and deep in quick succession, interwoven with each other over time and across platforms to create a profound and meaningful relationship for all those involved. Fans and creators often mobilize together to support each other's charitable efforts and passions, which have further fostered their affection for each other and had deeply meaningful impacts on those involved, and often beyond them in the world in general. The Creation employee I spoke with noted this quality of the relationship, saying that “although there are a lot of shows that have used social media to make themselves more popular, *Supernatural* has really stood out for the ways that Jared and Jensen and Misha, and really a lot of the cast, have understood the importance of the connections with the fans, and really taken advantage of that to do a lot of good. Misha, I think, especially took advantage of that early on.” Fans have worked with Misha and his team through his charity, Random Acts, to help build children's centers and schools in

places like Nicaragua and Haiti, where efforts were particularly concentrated after the 2010 earthquake, as well as organizing community-building events around the globe, promoting a philosophy based on the idea that little acts of charity and kindness work together to bring about meaningful change in the world.⁸ Fans dedicate an impressive amount of time, energy, and money to supporting Random Acts, as well as the other charitable efforts of the cast. This past year, Jared Padalecki, one of the show's leads, shared stories of his deeply personal battles with depression and came forward with the Always Keep Fighting campaign, a philosophy and philanthropic movement that promotes awareness and support for those dealing with depression and other personal struggles. Fans incorporated this mantra into their interactions with the cast immediately, even organizing together with Random Acts to surprise Jared in Hall H, the biggest stage at San Diego Comic Con, by simultaneously lighting electronic candles emblazoned with "Always Keep Fighting" to show their love and support for the movement.⁹ "Everything we do with the fans, it's always so much bigger than I would ever expect. It's pretty mind-blowing," Rob said, describing another instance of phenomenal fan support. Rich and Rob presented the fans with an idea they had for a web-series, *Kings of Con*, in which they would play satirical versions of themselves in order to showcase some of the crazy, wonderful, and weird experiences they have had being on the convention circuit for so many years. They came to the fans with an Indiegogo campaign and the goal of raising \$100,000 in 45 days– and reached that goal in about 26 hours, overall raising almost \$280,000¹⁰.

In turn, the cast has been incredibly supportive of the fans, in both individual and collective efforts. Many of them love opportunities to reciprocate the love they have gotten from the fans, and express this in a number of ways. One of the most striking was their recent collaboration with the sisters Hilly and Hannah Hindi, creators of the parody series *The Hillywood Show*. The Hindis create musical parodies of pop culture media, from *Twilight* to *Pirates of the Caribbean* to *Doctor Who*, usually starring only themselves and other members of their team. However, when they approached Osric Chau about creating a parody for *Supernatural*, not only did he join their main cast to play Sam, but he and Richard Speight worked to bring in 13 other cast members, including Jared, Jensen, and Misha, for cameos to surprise the fans with when the video premiered¹¹. Unilaterally, what comes through loud and clear in these interactions is the mutual care for the stories the fans and creators share with each other, from their life experiences, to their shared passion for doing good and having fun, to their love for the themes and stories of *Supernatural* itself. Returning to the metaphor of the fourth wall collapsing between the fans and creators, a recent event at the convention in Minneapolis embodied *Supernatural*'s efforts to replace the wall with open and reciprocal caring and understanding. A fan approached the mic to ask a question at Jared and Jensen's panel, and prefaced it with a personal story about how show has helped her in so many ways. In response, Jared and Jensen left their chairs in the middle of the stage to lie down on its edge in order to embrace her (Figure 1). Moments like these make it clear why the creators and fans refer to themselves as "The SPN Family."

The Question of Influence

That being said, like all families, this one has seen its fair share of fights over issues that continue to resurface without ever fully being addressed or resolved.

Even accounting for their diversity in specific content, forum, and mode of expression, the interactions discussed thus far share a crucial similarity as exemplars of times when everyone is, as Rob pointed out, on the same page in their focus and feelings, or at least have decided to lay aside their differences for the time being to celebrate the things they *do* have in common. However, there are some times when interactions have aggravated these differences instead, particularly in recent years. My previous project showcased the ways in which fans are differentiated not just by the interpretations of the narrative and characters of the show they are invested in, but also by how they derive these interpretations. From my conversations with fans about these differences emerged a fundamental question that I have found to be at the heart of a lot of conflicts among fans and between fans and creators: *Who does Supernatural belong to?*

Wrapped up in this question are other issues about the power of authorship, its relationship to creating and determining meaning in a text, the role of the audience in the production of a continuous narrative like *Supernatural* and other television shows, and the cultural responsibilities of media creators. As opportunities for interaction between creators and fans have grown in prominence, these questions have become more pressing. One of the key debates that has resulted from this is whether these interactions need only be used to praise aspects of the show and relationship that are already appreciated, or if they could be an

opportunity to voice concerns about less favorable aspects so that they might be addressed, with the intent of making an already good thing even better. This topic reveals the most divisive perspectives both within the fandom and among the creators when framed as the questions, “Should fans be able to have input and influence the future of *Supernatural*, particularly regarding the fate of the characters and direction of the narrative?”

This question bothers some fans and creators at the most basic level because of its blatant disruption of the old model of fan-creator relationships. As a number of people I spoke to put it, there used to be a traditional relationship between creators and fans that everyone at least agreed to comply with, where creators made a product, and fans maybe created works in response to it in their own spaces, but both parties expected it to be a linear, unilateral relationship. While this model is not as ubiquitous as it once was, some fans and creators still adhere to and value it. One fan, Ellie Young, said, “I’m definitely one of those people who wants to keep the fandom side of things, like what fans like and what fans are interested in, *in* the fandom. I feel like there’s sort of what the show *really* is, and the path that its on, and that really takes precedent. I might like what I like, which is different than parts of the real show, and that’s fine, but I don’t want the cast, or the writers, to know about it.”¹² A member of *Supernatural*’s production team also voiced a desire to maintain a separation between creators and fans, in somewhat blunter language, saying, “Look, there are people who make sandwiches and there are people who eat them. Yes, we want you to like the sandwiches so you buy more, but if you have problem with how much mayo your sandwich-maker uses, that’s your problem. Any

‘complex relationship’ you have with your sandwich-maker is entirely in your own mind.”¹³

Though most resistance to fans having input into the show was expressed in more moderate terms, underlying many commentaries from people I spoke to was a similarly strong desire to maintain boundaries out of the concern that opening the door to any fan voices would drown the show in a flood of all voices, and that the desire on the part of the creators to satisfy every perspective would compromise the integrity of the story being told on the show. While this is a valid concern, and one that has not been unfounded when looking at other shows that have tried to incorporate fan perspectives into their storytelling, most of the other fans and creators I spoke to feel that, in the past, *Supernatural* has modeled good examples of being able to differentiate between listening to and understanding fans’ desires, and doing exactly what they say. Kathy Larsen recalled Kripke’s response to fan complaints about two characters in season three – while one of them was superfluous to his broader plan for the series, the other was integral to the plot and relationships with the Winchesters. As such, he listened to the fans and wrote the first character out, but retained the other despite their protests, thus preserving the integrity of his story while still incorporating fan interests.¹⁴

Anna Pullman, a fan, summed up the positive view of being open to fan influence with her observation that “there’s this notion that the original plan for something like a TV show is always the one that’s going to produce the best story and the most interesting character moments, but I would argue that there are a lot of moments in pop culture, both in *Supernatural* and otherwise, that happen by

accident and end up being better than the original plan. So the fact that authors can change their minds or be influenced by various things – whether it's critical response, or fan response, or the network, or just really liking the chemistry between two actors – and realize their story is going to be a bigger thing than they planned for, and be open to new possibilities and different perspectives, can actually make the writing better.”¹⁵ Many fans also noted that the topics on which they are seeking to give input are often deeply ideological and culturally relevant, regarding such topics as the treatment and representation of female and queer characters. “I think people who see fans upset about these things on the show, and think we just want the writers to, like, hand the pen over, but that’s really reductive. We just want them to know what their audience wants so they can try to take it into consideration. There does need to be a separation between creator and consumer, but I do think that the writers need to really shape up and actually look at some of the criticisms that are happening right now, to get *why* people are angry and understand that people’s issues aren’t superficial.”¹⁶

As I noted earlier, fans and creators have both come to feel reciprocally cared for and respected through their positive interactions at conventions and online. This relationship has become a place for people to bond over and cathartically express both positive and negative, deeply personal topics. Daniel Stevenson, a fan, spoke to this experience and its relationship to the desire to have an influence over the show. “I do think that some of creators are really learning about fan culture – and not just fan culture, but about the things that fans care about other than the show, the real-world issues that they care about, that we are seeking escape from through the

show. The fandom is mostly female, and a huge number of us are queer, and we deal with a lot because of that, but fandom, and the show, and the relationship with the cast gives us a way to escape and work through these problems. But that's why it's so alarming to see these same horrible things happen on the show."¹⁷ A number of fans pointed to season 10 as one that had given them a lot of hope that their concerns were being heard, as it featured a number of well-written new female characters, new queer characters, and an increase of involvement in the main story for Charlie, the only recurring queer character the show has had in ten seasons. "It wasn't perfect," said Nate, "but it was really encouraging to see. But...then they killed Charlie."¹⁸

The Girl with the Dungeons and Dragons Tattoo

Charlie Bradbury (Felicia Day) was introduced in season 7 in *The Girl with the Dungeons and Dragons Tattoo* as a computer prodigy who becomes involved in the Winchesters' efforts to defeat the primordial evil, the Leviathan, which had infiltrated corporate America¹⁹. Clever, geeky, kind, and queer, she quickly became a fan favorite and a symbol for many fans of the realization of their hopes for having a positive media icon they could identify with as women, fans, and queer people. She was also hailed as a replacement for one of the former audience stand-ins, Becky Rosen, a poorly dressed and aggressively sexual, defensive fan of the *Supernatural* books who could barely contain herself in interactions with the Winchesters. While Becky was always a controversial character, fans were overwhelmingly less receptive to her over time, as her bad behaviors grew worse and the Winchesters

more disdainful of her. Charlie was seen as a sign that the creators no longer perceived the fans as the sort of insulting stereotype Becky had been, and her continued presence inspired hope in many fans that the fan-creator relationship was growing more reciprocal and understanding.

This faith was shaken by Charlie's murder at the end of season 10 by Jacob Styne, a member of a family credited within the show with facilitating a number of world horrors, including the rise of the Nazi party and the Holocaust.²⁰ Fans were horrified not only by her death, but also by the manner of her death, which exemplified a number of upsetting tropes common in female and queer media stories. Fans have also been greatly discouraged and infuriated by the writers' responses to their outrage over Charlie's death, and many now feel that their past investment and trust in the show was misplaced, and that they are now not being heard or even purposefully, willfully misunderstood and ignored.

When considering the creators' responses to fan reactions to Charlie's death, it is important to keep Paul Booth's observation in mind: "We tend to lump media creators together in the same way that we lump fans together, but just as that is not appropriate or useful for looking at fans, it doesn't really describe the situation with media creators."²¹ Indeed, many of the cast members expressed their own disappointment and shock at Charlie's death, as did Robbie Thompson, the writer who first created Charlie. He and a number of other creators, including Jensen Ackles and Felicia Day, lobbied against Charlie's death, knowing how much she meant to the fan community, even if they did not understand all the reasons for exactly why she was so symbolically important to them.²² Fans were relieved to

hear about these creators' support, and over the months since Charlie's death, have found themselves most frustrated by the showrunner Jeremy Carver and executive producer Robert Singer's responses to their vocal criticisms of their decision. Both creators have often defended their decision as just "going where the story takes us," framing Charlie's death, in the ears of many fans, as something inevitable and out of their control. Mark Oshiro, among many of the fans and academics who engage with the show, was deeply critical of this rhetoric. "To me, that kind of statement doesn't make any sense, because *you are the writer* – the story isn't autonomous. For me it's someone who doesn't want to take responsibility for the thing that they've done."²³ Kathy had a similar concern, expressing a common perspective among the audience. "I am someone who is very invested in the integrity of the storyteller to tell the story they want to tell...but it's a lot harder to support that view when you continually see the storyteller failing to provide a reason for telling the story the way they are that compensates for the negative effect of their story on their audience. So as much as I want to protect their integrity as artists, I do feel, as a viewer, as a fan, just 'How dare you so wantonly do that, with no justification, no rhyme or reason for it, without any evident payoff, and not take responsibility for having done it now that its done?'"²⁴

Fans have also been frustrated by the writers' use of platitudes like "everyone dies on Supernatural – but they always come back!"²⁵ as excuses not to engage with fans and understand why they are upset, particularly, again, regarding the ways in which Charlie's death played into bad patterns of queer and female storytelling both in Supernatural's own past and the media landscape at large.

Denise Cooke expressed a desire for characters to just be able to be characters, and felt that the writers often only considered them only so far as they affected the story they wished to tell - "But it's complicated," she noted, "when people have a stake in the character not just for their role in the story, but also in what they represent. They kind of become a symbol and I don't know if the writers always understand the implicit messages they're sending when they use characters in a certain way."²⁶

This idea that characters often take on layers of meaning, and that manipulating them for the basic purposes of the story can also have intended or unintended chain reactions or ripple effects came up a lot in my discussions with fans. These conversations produced a metaphor of the iceberg for characters like Charlie: her existence as a character interacting with the plot and characters of *Supernatural* is the tip, and her representational value as a positive queer, female, and fannish role model, particularly in contrast to the majority of negative portrayals and stories of these identities, is the part of the iceberg below the water. When the writers treat Charlie as if she is only an ice cube floating on the surface of the water, they invalidate and undermine the emotional investment fans have in her deeper qualities, and, however incidentally, become complicit in the harmful storytelling of the past. Fans are asking the creators to become fully conscious of and responsible for the stories they tell through their treatment of Charlie. As Paige Astor, a fan, said, "If you are a creator who wants to incorporate diversity into your media, which you should want to do, but you are not part of that community that you are now representing, you need to do research, and go to that community to understand how to portray them. And that doesn't just mean looking at how you

write these characters to make sure they are people instead of stereotypes, but looking at the history of how the stories about these people have been told so that you don't play into harmful patterns."²⁷

Paige and Denise, like many of the people I spoke to for this project, point to the importance of understanding the ways in which particular characters and stories are coded with meaning, and the disparity between how people from different cultural, personal, and creative backgrounds understand these codes. Many stressed their awareness that it is very unlikely the writers intentionally wrote an incredibly insensitive death for Charlie, but also made it clear that this is not what has been frustrating over the past few months. Rather, what has aggravated and alienated fans is the writers' repeated refusal to acknowledge the symbolic value of Charlie and her story, or their need to pay attention to the impact of their work of their own intentions.

Mark spoke to the troubling consequences a failure to address these concerns has already begun to bring about, saying that "there have been so many times where I've seen the show have the potential to do something, and it either ignores it completely, dabbles in it only a little before backtracking, or does something so completely regressive like killing Charlie, that I just don't know that I have the faith anymore for the show to do something good with the possibilities I see for it. I've just lost faith in the follow-through."²⁸ This collapse in communication and goodwill has had a noticeable impact on the fandom, which is normally vocal and excited after a season ends, generating a variety of diverse conversation and content as it waits through the hiatus for the new season. This year, many of the fans

I spoke to observed, most people are struggling to make sense of their feelings, and are waiting with precaution and worry, rather than anticipation, for the new season, hoping to see evidence of the conflicts of the past few months in a new approach by the writers within the show, but having very low faith in the likelihood of this outcome. Given how much people love the show and the positive aspects of the relationship, it is sad for many to see fans walk away and some of the creators shy away from trying to understand the fans. Despite these substantial pitfalls, however, many do think it is possible to develop better ways for fans and creators of media in general to interact with each other in meaningful, mutually respectful ways that are conducive to understanding each other, even if it is too late for *Supernatural*, though many do hope that it is not.

We've Got Work To Do

If we accept the idea that fan-creator interactions should be fostered, and that fan input should be considered regarding the future of the show, the problem we are then faced with is how and where to make these conversations possible. Anna Pullman pointed out that, "One question at a panel and 140-character tweets are not the places to have an in-depth philosophical discussion about really important, culturally, ideologically powerful narratives. The problem is that there is no other place to have them, and fans are doing what they always do and using what we have as best we can for what we want to do." The lack of conduciveness of these platforms have made past attempts at conversations incredibly difficult and aggravating for people on all sides – but the reaction to that is not to stop trying to

have the conversations, but find, or more likely, actively create, better places to have them.

“I think if you’ve been in tune at all in the last five years, you can see that the game has really changed. Being able to interact with your fans and having that connection with them, this online and in-person presence, that’s how things are gonna be for the future,”²⁹ Rob said, and Nate added, “I do think that the fact that there have been, for the last decade, so many attempts to contact and engage with the writers and directors and so forth, through social media and at these conventions, that they are starting to actually come out and engage, and that does give me hope.”³⁰ One suggestion both fans and creators have responded positively to is the development of mediated positions between fans and creators to act as diplomats, translators, and facilitators of understanding between the two sides. Mark points out that people like “Kim Rhodes and Osric Chau have ended up being really good conduits to the fans. Like, if the creators are going to listen to anyone, they should listen to these people and what they have to say about the fandom. These guys have conversation with fans that are more in-depth than any of the creators get to do, and I do feel like they need to listen to fans, and honestly, a great way to do that is through people like Kim or Osric.”³¹ Creators and fans also saw positions like these as ones that could be filled by people coming across from the fandom side, creating teams that bridge the spectrum from fan to creator in order to facilitate conversation and understanding.

Overwhelmingly, the creators and fans of *Supernatural* exhibit an intense passion and investment in the show and in their relationship with each other. Even

among the fans who feel hurt and betrayed by the recent actions of the show speak to the intense love that persists throughout the SPN Family, for you do not see people getting that disappointed in something they do not care about deeply. It is this abiding love for the show and the relationships it has fostered that makes it hardest for fans and creators both to see them threatened by the recent collapse in negotiations in the fallout from Charlie's death, but it is also this passion that underlies efforts to develop better forums and positions to help salvage the dialogue between creators and fans. Rob spoke for many of the creators when he said, "you know, we wouldn't keep going coming to conventions, and talking with the fans, if we didn't love doing it, if the good didn't outweigh the bad. I love being a part of it, I feel honored to be a part of it. And I'm not saying that to kiss up to anyone, it's changed my life. It really has changed my life in so many ways. There are so many different tiers to what it is - there's the conventions, characters that we play, there are these side projects that we have, then there are the actual friendships I have with my actor friends, and the friendships I have with the fans, and there's the show itself, and its all so meaningful,"³² and many of the fans echoed this sentiment, and shared a desire to work to overcome the communication problems that have marred an otherwise incredibly fulfilling phenomenon to be a part of. Social media and conventions are not likely to fade away in the future, which means the already crumbling fourth wall will continue to be erode away. While it is likely, and even expected, that this deconstruction of the fourth wall will continue to exacerbate existing problems and bring about new ones as well, the dedication, investment, and passion most of the fans and creators of *Supernatural* have for interrogating and

finding solutions for the problems they face in their relationship, for the sake of protecting and fostering the aspects they value, makes me hopeful about what will be built in its place.



Figure 1

List of Participants

- Paige Astor. Personal Interview. 29 Jul. 2015.
- Rob Benedict. Personal Interview. 9 Jun. 2015.
- Paul Booth. Personal Interview. 20 Jul. 2015.
- Denise Cooke. Personal Interview. 8 Jun. 2015.
- Lara Davis. Personal Interview. 21 Jul. 2015.
- Alex Hart. Personal Interview. 18 Jul. 2015.
- Joy Regullano. Personal Interview. 21 Jul. 2015.
- Kathy Larsen. Personal Interview. 26 Jun. 2015.
- Sarah Little. Personal Interview. 10 Aug. 2015.
- Danielle O'Hare. Personal Interview. 17 Jul. 2015.
- Mark Oshiro. Personal Interview. 17 Aug. 2015.
- Amy Parker. Personal Interview. 29 Jul. 2015.
- Anna Pullman. Personal Interview. 10 Jun. 2015.
- Katherine Ramdeen. Personal Interview. 10 Sept. 2015.
- Nate Stevenson. Personal Interview. 10 Jun. 2015.
- Caitlin Strong. Personal Interview. 1 Aug. 2015.
- Ellie Young. Personal Interview. 8 Jun. 2015.
- Lynn Zubernis. Personal Interview. 24 Jul. 2015.
- [Cast Member]. Personal Interview. 22 Jul. 2015.
- [Production Member]. Personal Email. 22 Jun. 2015.
- [Creation Employee]. Personal Interview. 13 Aug. 2015.

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- ¹ Karkanias, Alena, "The Intra- and Inter-Sub-Community Dynamics of Fandom" (2014). *Summer Research*. Paper 230. http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer_research/230
- ² [Creation Employee]. Personal Interview. 13 Aug. 2015.
- ³ Rob Benedict. Personal Interview. 9 Jun. 2015.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbfgLTtSUSA>
- ⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl6_cKme06w
- ⁷ Rob Benedict. Personal Interview. 9 Jun. 2015.
- ⁸ <http://www.randomacts.org/about/>
- ⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEM7j9FdGLg>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/kings-of-con/x/2033375>
- ¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCZy8cAgBlM>
- ¹² Ellie Young. Personal Interview. 8 Jun. 2015.
- ¹³ [Production Member]. Personal Email. 22 Jun. 2015.
- ¹⁴ Kathy Larsen. Personal Interview. 26 Jun. 2015
- ¹⁵ Anna Pullman. Personal Interview. 10 Jun. 2015.
- ¹⁶ Nate Stevenson. Personal Interview. 10 Jun. 2015.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Qklou73xhA>
- ²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GaXfl6brZ3o>
- ²¹ Paul Booth. Personal Interview. 20 Jul. 2015.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Mark Oshiro. Personal Interview. 17 Aug. 2015.
- ²⁴ Kathy Larsen. Personal Interview. 26 Jun. 2015
- ²⁵ This is, however, statistically true – Sam and Dean themselves have both died a few times each
- ²⁶ Denise Cooke. Personal Interview. 8 Jun. 2015.
- ²⁷ Paige Astor. Personal Interview. 29 Jul. 2015.
- ²⁸ Mark Oshiro. Personal Interview. 17 Aug. 2015.
- ²⁹ Rob Benedict. Personal Interview. 9 Jun. 2015.
- ³⁰ Nate Stevenson. Personal Interview. 10 Jun. 2015.
- ³¹ Mark Oshiro. Personal Interview. 17 Aug. 2015.
- ³² Rob Benedict. Personal Interview. 9 Jun. 2015.