Henry Jenkins

# Convergence Culture

*Where Old and New Media Collide*

**New York University Press** • *New York and London*

suggest that media producers can garner greater loyalty and more compliance to legitimate concerns if they court the allegiance of fans; the best way to do this turns out to be giving them some stake in the survival of the franchise, ensuring that the provided content more fully reflects their interests, creating a space where they can make their own creative contributions, and recognizing the best work that emerges. In a world of ever-expanding media options, there is going to be a struggle for viewers the likes of which corporate media has never seen before. Many of the smartest folks in the media industry know this: some are trembling, and others are scrambling to renegotiate their relationships with consumers. In the end, the media producers need fans just as much as fans need them.

# 5

# Why Heather Can Write

## *Media Literacy and the Harry Potter Wars*

So far, we have seen that corporate media increasingly recognizes the value, and the threat, posed by fan participation. Media producers and advertisers now speak about "emotional capital" or "lovemarks" to refer to the importance of audience investment and participation in media content. Storytellers now think about storytelling in terms of creating openings for consumer participation. At the same time, consumers are using new media technologies to engage with old media content, seeing the Internet as a vehicle for collective problem solving, public deliberation, and grassroots creativity. Indeed, we have suggested that it is the interplay—and tension—between the top-down force of corporate convergence and the bottom-up force of grassroots convergence that is driving many of the changes we are observing in the media landscape.

On all sides and at every level, the term "participation" has emerged as a governing concept, albeit one surrounded by conflicting expectations. Corporations imagine participation as something they can start and stop, channel and reroute, commodify and market. The prohibitionists are trying to shut down unauthorized participation; the collaborationists are trying to win grassroots creators over to their side. Consumers, on the other side, are asserting a right to participate in the culture, on their own terms, when and where they wish. This empowered consumer faces a series of struggles to preserve and broaden this perceived right to participate.

All of these tensions surfaced very visibly through two sets of conflicts surrounding J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, conflicts that fans collectively refer to as "the Potter wars." On the one hand, there was the struggle of teachers, librarians, book publishers, and civil liberty groups to stand up against efforts by the religious right to have the *Harry Potter* books removed from school libraries and banned from

local bookstores. On the other, there were the efforts of Warner Bros. to rein in fan appropriations of the *Harry Potter* books on the grounds that they infringed on the studio's intellectual property. Both efforts threatened the right of children to participate within the imaginative world of *Harry Potter*—one posing a challenge to their right to read, the other a challenge to their right to write. From a purely legal standpoint, the first constitutes a form of censorship, the other a legitimate exercise of property rights. From the perspective of the consumer, on the other hand, the two start to blur since both place restrictions on our ability to fully engage with a fantasy that has taken on a central place in our culture.

The closer we look at these two conflicts, the more complex they seem. Contradictions, confusions, and multiple perspectives should be anticipated at a moment of transition where one media paradigm is dying and another is being born. None of us really knows how to live in this era of media convergence, collective intelligence, and participatory culture. These changes are producing anxieties and uncertainties, even panic, as people imagine a world without gatekeepers and live with the reality of expanding corporate media power. Our responses to these changes cannot be easily mapped in traditional ideological terms: there is not a unified right wing or left wing response to convergence culture. Within Christianity, there are some groups that embrace the potentials of the new participatory culture and others terrified by them. Within companies, as we have seen, there are sudden lurches between prohibitionist and collaborationist responses. Among media reformers, some forms of participation are valued more than others. Fans disagree among themselves on how much control J. K. Rowling or Warner Bros. should have over what consumers do with *Harry Potter*. It isn't as if any of us knows all of the answers yet.

All of the above suggests that the Potter wars are at heart a struggle over what rights we have to read and write about core cultural myths —that is, a struggle over literacy. Here, literacy is understood to include not simply what we can do with printed matter but also what we can do with media. Just as we would not traditionally assume that someone is literate if they can read but not write, we should not assume that someone possesses media literacy if they can consume but not express themselves. Historically, constraints on literacy come from attempts to control different segments of the population—some societies have embraced universal literacy, others have restricted literacy to

specific social classes or along racial and gender lines. We may also see the current struggle over literacy as having the effect of determining who has the right to participate in our culture and on what terms. *Harry Potter* is a particularly rich focal point for studying our current constraints on literacy because the book itself deals so explicitly with issues of education (often lending its voice to children's rights over institutional constraints) and because the book has been so highly praised for inciting young people to develop their literacy skills.

Yet, the books have also been the focus of various attempts to constrain what kids read and write. My focus is on the *Harry Potter* wars as a struggle over competing notions of media literacy and how it should be taught: the informal pedagogy that emerged within the *Harry Potter* fan community, the attempts to tap kids' interests in the books in classrooms and libraries, the efforts of corporate media to teach us a lesson about the responsible treatment of their intellectual property, the anxieties about the secularization of education expressed by cultural conservatives, and the very different conception of pedagogy shared by Christian supporters of the *Harry Potter* novels within the "discernment movement." All sides want to claim a share in how we educate the young since shaping childhood is often seen as a way of shaping the future direction of our culture.[1] By looking more closely at these various bids on education, we may map some of the conflicting expectations shaping convergence culture. In the process, I will consider what happens as the concept of participatory culture runs up against two of the most powerful forces shaping children's lives: education and religion.

Consider this a story of participation and its discontents.

## Hogwarts and All

When she was thirteen, Heather Lawver read a book that she says changed her life: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.[2] Inspired by reports that J. K. Rowling's novel was getting kids to read, she wanted to do her part to promote literacy. Less than a year later, she launched *The Daily Prophet* (http://www.dprophet.com), a Web-based "school newspaper" for the fictional Hogwarts. Today, the publication has a staff of 102 children from all over the world.

Lawver, still in her teens, is its managing editor. She hires columnists who cover their own "beats" on a weekly basis—everything from the

latest quidditch matches to muggle cuisine. Heather personally edits each story, getting it ready for publication. She encourages her staff to closely compare their original submissions with the edited versions and consults with them on issues of style and grammar as needed. Heather initially paid for the site through her allowances until someone suggested opening a post office box where participants could send their contributions; she still runs it on a small budget, but at least she can draw on the allowances of her friends and contributors to keep it afloat during hard times.

Lawver, by the way, is home schooled and hasn't set foot in a classroom since first grade. Her family had been horrified by what they saw as racism and anti-intellectualism, which they encountered when she entered first grade in a rural Mississippi school district. She explained, "It was hard to combat prejudices when you are facing it every day. They just pulled me and one of my brothers out of school. And we never wanted to go back."

A girl who hadn't been in school since first grade was leading a worldwide staff of student writers with no adult supervision to publish a school newspaper for a school that existed only in their imaginations.

From the start, Lawver framed her project with explicit pedagogical goals that she used to help parents understand their children's participation. In an open letter to parents of her contributors, Lawver describes the site's goals:

> The Daily Prophet is an organization dedicated to bringing the world of literature to life. . . . By creating an online "newspaper" with articles that lead the readers to believe this fanciful world of Harry Potter to be real, this opens the mind to exploring books, diving into the characters, and analyzing great literature. By developing the mental ability to analyze the written word at a young age, children will find a love for reading unlike any other. By creating this faux world we are learning, creating, and enjoying ourselves in a friendly utopian society.[3]

Lawver is so good at mimicking teacherly language that one forgets that she has not yet reached adulthood. For example, she provides reassurances that the site will protect children's actual identities and that she will screen posts to ensure that none contain content inappropriate for younger participants.[4] Lawver was anxious to see her work recognized by teachers, librarians, and her fellow home schoolers. She devel-

oped detailed plans for how teachers can use her template to create localized version of a Hogwarts school newspaper as class projects. A number of teachers have taken up her offer.

Whether encountered inside or outside formal education, Lawver's project enabled kids to immerse themselves into the imaginary world of Hogwarts and to feel a very real sense of connection to an actual community of children around the world who were working together to produce The Daily Prophet. The school they were inventing together (building on the foundations of J. K. Rowling's novel) could not have been more different from the one she had escaped in Mississippi. Here, people of many different ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds (some real, some imagined) formed a community where individual differences were accepted and where learning was celebrated.

The point of entry into this imaginary school was the construction of a fictional identity, and subsequently these personas get woven into a series of "news stories" reporting on events at Hogwarts. For many kids, the profile is all they would write—having a self within the fiction was enough to satisfy the needs that brought them to the site. For others, it was the first step toward constructing a more elaborate fantasy about their life at Hogwarts. In their profiles, kids often combined mundane details of their everyday experiences with fantastical stories about their place within J. K. Rowling's world:

> I recently transferred from Madame McKay's Academy of Magic in America to come to Hogwarts. Lived in southern California for most of my life, and my mother never told my father that she was a witch until my fifth birthday (he left shortly afterwards).

> Orphaned when at 5 when her parents died of cancer, this pure blood witch was sent to live with a family of wizards associated with the Ministry of Magic.

The image of the special child being raised in a mundane (in this case, muggle) family and discovering their identities as they enter school age is a classic theme of fantasy novels and fairy tales, yet here there are often references to divorce or cancer, real-world difficulties so many kids face. From the profiles themselves, we can't be sure whether these are problems they have confronted personally or if they are anxious possibilities they are exploring through their fantasies. Heather has

suggested that many kids come to *The Daily Prophet* because their schools and families have failed them in some way; they use the new school community to work through their feelings about some traumatic event or to compensate for their estrangement from kids in their neighborhoods. Some children are drawn toward some of the fantasy races —elves, goblins, giants, and the like—while other kids have trouble imagining themselves to be anything other than muggle-born, even in their fantasy play. Children use stories to escape from or reaffirm aspects of their real lives.[5]

Rowling's richly detailed world allows many points of entry. Some kids imagine themselves as related to the characters, the primary ones like Harry Potter or Snape, of course, but also minor background figures—the inventors of the quidditch brooms, the authors of the textbooks, the heads of referenced agencies, classmates of Harry's mother and father, any affiliation that allows them to claim a special place for themselves in the story. In her book, *Writing Superheroes* (1997), Anne Haas Dyson uses the metaphor of a "ticket to play" to describe how the roles provided by children's media properties get deployed by children in a classroom space to police who is allowed to participate and what roles they can assume.[6] Some children fit comfortably within the available roles; others feel excluded and have to work harder to insert themselves into the fantasy. Dyson's focus has to do with divisions of gen-der and race, primarily, but given the global nature of *The Daily Prophet* community, nationality also was potentially at stake. Rowling's acknowledgment in subsequent books that Hogwarts interacted with schools around the world gave students from many countries a "ticket" into the fantasy: "Sirius was born in India to Ariel and Derek Koshen. Derek was working as a Ministry of Magic ambassador to the Indian Ministry. Sirius was raised in Bombay, and speaks Hindi fluently. While he was in Bombay he saved a stranded Hippogriff from becoming a jacket, cementing his long-lasting love of magical creatures. He attended Gahdal School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in Thailand." Here, it helps that the community is working hard to be inclusive and accepts fantasies that may not comfortably match the world described within the novels.

One striking consequence of the value placed on education in the *Harry Potter* books is that almost all of the participants at *The Daily Prophet* imagine themselves to be gifted students. Kids who read recreationally are still a subset of the total school population, so it is very likely that many of these kids are teacher's pets in real life. Hermione represented a particularly potent role model for the studiously minded young girls who were key contributors to *The Daily Prophet*. Some feminist critics argue that she falls into traditional feminine stereotypes of dependency and nurturance.[7] This may be true, but this character provides some point of identification for female readers within a book otherwise so focused on young boys. Here's how one young writer framed her relationship to the character:

> My name is Mandi Granger. I am 12 yrs old. I am also muggle born. Yes, I am related to Hermione Granger. I am Hermione's cousin. I am attending Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. This is my third year at Hogwarts. I am doing this article between all my studies. I guess I pick up my study habits from my cousin. I am in the Gryffindor house just like my just like my cousin. I do know Harry Potter personally by my cousin. My cousin took him to my house before I went to Hogwarts. We mostly talk about Hogwarts and the Weasley's children.

Through children's fantasy play, Hermione takes on a much more active and central role than Rowling provided her. As Ellen Seiter notes in regard to girl-targeted series such as *Strawberry Shortcake* (1981), feminist parents sometimes sell their daughters short by underestimating their ability to extend beyond what is represented on the screen and by stigmatizing the already limited range of media content available to them.[8] Female readers are certainly free to identify across gender with a range of other characters—and one can see the claims of special family ties as one way of marking those identifications. Yet, at an age when gender roles are reinforced on all sides, transgressing gender roles through the fantasy may be harder than reconstructing the characters as vehicles for your own empowerment fantasies.

In some cases, the back stories for these characters are quite elaborate with detailed accounts of their wands, the animal familiars, their magical abilities, their favorite classes, their future plans, and the like. These fictional personas can contain the seeds of larger narratives, suggesting how the construction of an identity may fuel subsequent fan fiction:

> I'm the only sister of Harry Potter, and I am going to play for the Gryffindor quidditch team this year as a chaser. My best friend is Cho Chang,

and I am dating Draco Malfoy (although Harry's not happy about that). One of my other good friends is Riley Ravenclaw, a co-writer. I have a few pets, a winged Thestral named Bostrio, a unicorn foal named Golden, and a snowy owl (like Hedwig) named Cassiddia. I was able to escape the Lord Voldemort attack on my family for the reason that I was holidaying with my Aunt Zeldy in Ireland at the time, though I mourn the loss of my mum and dad. I was mad about the awful things Ms. Skeeter wrote about my little brother, and I have sent her her own little package of undiluted bubotuber pus. HA!

As *The Daily Prophet* reporters develop their reports about life at Hogwarts, they draw each other's personas into their stories, trying to preserve what each child sees as its special place within this world. The result is a jointly produced fantasy—somewhere between a role-playing game and fan fiction. The intertwining of fantasies becomes a key element of bonding for these kids, who come to care about one another through interacting with these fictional personas.

What skills do children need to become full participants in convergence culture? Across this book, we have identified a number—the ability to pool knowledge with others in a collaborative enterprise (as in *Survivor* spoiling), the ability to share and compare value systems by evaluating ethical dramas (as occurs in the gossip surrounding reality television), the ability to make connections across scattered pieces of information (as occurs when we consume *The Matrix*, 1999, or *Pokémon*, 1998), the ability to express your interpretations and feelings toward popular fictions through your own folk culture (as occurs in *Star Wars* fan cinema), and the ability to circulate what you create via the Internet so that it can be shared with others (again as in fan cinema). The example of *The Daily Prophet* suggests yet another important cultural competency: role-playing both as a means of exploring a fictional realm and as a means of developing a richer understanding of yourself and the culture around you. These kids came to understand *Harry Potter* by occupying a space within Hogwarts; occupying such a space helped them to map more fully the rules of this fictional world and the roles that various characters played within it. Much as an actor builds up a character by combining things discovered through research with things learned through personal introspection, these kids were drawing on their own experiences to flesh out various aspects of Rowling's fiction. This is a kind of intellectual mastery than comes only through active

participation. At the same time, role-playing was providing an inspiration for them to expand other kinds of literacy skills—those already valued within traditional education.

What's striking about this process, though, is that it takes place outside the classroom and beyond any direct adult control. Kids are teaching kids what they need to become full participants in convergence culture. More and more, educators are coming to value the learning that occurs in these informal and recreational spaces, especially as they confront the constraints imposed on learning via educational policies that seemingly value only what can be counted on a standardized test. If children are going to acquire the skills needed to be full participants in their culture, they may well learn these skills through involvement in activities such as editing the newspaper of an imaginary school or in teaching one another skills needed to do well in massively multiplayer games or any number of others things that teachers and parents currently regard as trivial pursuits.

## Rewriting School

University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Education Professor James Paul Gee calls such informal learning cultures "affinity spaces," asking why people learn more, participate more actively, engage more deeply with popular culture than they do with the contents of their textbooks.[9] As one sixteen-year-old *Harry Potter* fan told me, "It is one thing to be discussing the theme of a short story you've never heard of before and couldn't care less about. It is another to be discussing the theme of your friend's 50,000-word opus about Harry and Hermione that they've spent three months writing."[10] Affinity spaces offer powerful opportunities for learning, Gee argues, because they are sustained by common endeavors that bridge across differences in age, class, race, gender, and educational level, because people can participate in various ways according to their skills and interests, because they depend on peer-to-peer teaching with each participant constantly motivated to acquire new knowledge or refine his or her existing skills, and because they allow each participant to feel like an expert while tapping the expertise of others. More and more literacy experts are recognizing that enacting, reciting, and appropriating elements from preexisting stories is a valuable and organic part of the process by which children develop cultural literacy.[11]

A decade ago, published fan fiction came mostly from women in their twenties, thirties, and beyond. Today, these older writers have been joined by a generation of new contributors who found fan fiction surfing the Internet and decided to see what they could produce. *Harry Potter* in particular has encouraged many young people to write and share their first stories. Zsenya, the thirty-three-year-old Webmistress of The Sugar Quill, a leading site for Harry Potter fan fiction, offered this comment:

> In many cases, the adults really try to watch out for the younger members (theoretically, everybody who registers for our forums must be at least 13). They're a little bit like den mothers. I think it's really actually an amazing way to communicate. . . . The absence of face-to-face equalizes everyone a little bit, so it gives the younger members a chance to talk with adults without perhaps some of the intimidation they might normally feel in talking to adults. And in the other direction, I think it helps the adults remember what it was like to be at a certain age or in a certain place in life.[12]

These older fans often find themselves engaging more directly with people like Flourish. Flourish started reading *The X-Files* fan fiction when she was ten, wrote her first Harry Potter stories at twelve, and published her first online novel at fourteen.[13] She quickly became a mentor for other emerging fan writers, including many who were twice her age or more. Most people assumed she was probably a college student. Interacting online allowed her to keep her age to herself until she had become so central to the fandom that nobody cared that she was in middle school.

Educators like to talk about "scaffolding," the ways that a good pedagogical process works in a step-by-step fashion, encouraging kids to try out new skills that build on those they have already mastered, providing support for these new steps until the learner feels sufficient confidence to take them on their own. In the classroom, scaffolding is provided by the teacher. In a participatory culture, the entire community takes on some responsibility for helping newbies find their way. Many young authors began composing stories on their own as a spontaneous response to a popular culture. For these young writers, the next step was the discovery of fan fiction on the Internet, which provided alternative models for what it meant to be an author. At first,

they might only read stories, but the fan community provides many incitements for readers to cross that last threshold into composing and submitting their own stories. And once a fan submits, the feedback he or she receives inspires further and improved writing.

What difference will it make, over time, if a growing percentage of young writers begin publishing and getting feedback on their work while they are still in high school? Will they develop their craft more quickly? Will they discover their voices at an earlier age? And what happens when these young writers compare notes, becoming critics, editors, and mentors? Will this help them develop a critical vocabulary for thinking about storytelling? Nobody is quite sure, but the potentials seem enormous. Authorship has an almost sacred aura in a world where there are limited opportunities to circulate your ideas to a larger public. As we expand access to mass distribution via the Web, our understanding of what it means to be an author—and what kinds of understanding of what it means to be an author—necessarily shifts. This shift authority should be ascribed to authors—necessarily shifts. This shift could lead to a heightened awareness of intellectual property rights as more and more people feel a sense of ownership over the stories they create. Yet, it also can result in a demystification of the creative process, a growing recognition of the communal dimensions of expression, as writing takes on more aspects of traditional folk practice.

The fan community has gone to extraordinary lengths to provide informal instruction to newer writers. The largest *Harry Potter* archive, www.fictionalley.org, currently hosts more than 30,000 stories and book chapters, including hundreds of completed or partially completed novels. These stories are written by authors of all ages. More than two hundred people are on its unpaid staff, including forty mentors who welcome each new participant individually. At The Sugar Quill, www.sugarquill.net, every posted story undergoes beta reading (a peer-review process). Beta reading takes its name from beta testing in computer programming: fans seek out advice on the rough drafts of their nearly completed stories so that they can smooth out "bugs" and take them to the next level. As the editors explain, "We want this to be a place where fanfiction can be read and enjoyed, but where writers who want more than just raves can come for actual (gentle—think Lupin, not McGonagall) constructive criticism and technical editing. We've found this to be essential for our own stories, and would be pleased to help with the stories of others. Our hope is that this experience will give people the courage and confidence to branch out and

start writing original stories."[14] (Lupin and McGonagall are two of the teachers Rowling depicts in the novels, Lupin a gentle pedagogue, McGonagall practicing a more tough love approach.) New writers often go through multiple drafts and multiple beta readers before their stories are ready for posting. "The Beta Reader service has really helped me to get the adverbs out of my writing and get my prepositions in the right place and improve my sentence structure and refine the overall quality of my writing," explains Sweeney Agonistes, an entering college freshman with years of publishing behind her.[15]

Instructions for beta readers, posted at Writer's University (www.writersu.net), a site that helps instruct fan editors and writers, offers some insights into the pedagogical assumptions shaping this process:

A good beta reader:
- admits to the author what his or her own strengths and weaknesses are—i.e. "I'm great at beta reading for plot, but not spelling!" Anyone who offers to check someone else's spelling, grammar, and punctuation should probably be at least worthy of a solid B in English, and preferably an A.
- reads critically to analyze stylistic problems, consistency, plot holes, unclarity, smoothness of flow and action, diction (choice of words), realism and appropriateness of dialog, and so forth. Does it get bogged down in unnecessary description or back-story? Do the characters "sound" like they're supposed to? Is the plot logical and do the characters all have motives for the things they do?
- suggests rather than edits. In most cases a beta reader shouldn't rewrite or merely correct problems. Calling the author's attention to problems helps the author be aware of them and thereby improve.
- points out the things he or she likes about a story. Even if it was the worst story you ever read, say something positive! Say multiple somethings positive! See the potential in every story. . . .
- is tactful, even with things she considers major flaws—but honest as well.
- improves her skills. If you are serious about wanting to help authors, consider reading some of the writing resources linked at the bottom of the page, which will give you some great perspective on common mistakes fanfic writers make, in addition to basic tips about what makes for good writing.[16]

This description constructs a different relationship between mentors and learners than shapes much schoolroom writing instruction, starting with the opening stipulation that the editors acknowledge their own strengths and limitations, and continuing down through the focus on suggestion rather than instruction as a means of getting students to think through the implications of their own writing process.

As educational researcher Rebecca Black notes, the fan community can often be more tolerant of linguistic errors than traditional classroom teachers and more helpful in enabling the learner to identify what they are actually trying to say because reader and writer operate within the same frame of reference, sharing a deep emotional investment in the content being explored.[17] The fan community promotes a broader range of different literary forms—not simply fan fiction but various modes of commentary—than the exemplars available to students in the classroom, and often they showcase realistic next steps for the learner's development rather than showing only professional writing that is far removed from anything most students will be able to produce.

Beyond beta reading, The Sugar Quill provides a range of other references relevant to fan writers, some dealing with questions of grammar and style, some dealing with the specifics of the *Harry Potter* universe, but all designed to help would-be writers improve their stories and push themselves in new directions. The Sugar Quill's genre classifications provide models for different ways would-be writers might engage with Rowling's text: "Alternative Points of View," which reframe the events of the book through the eyes of a character other than Harry; "I Wonder Ifs," which explore "possibilities" that are hinted at but not developed within the novels; "Missing Moments," which fill in gaps between the plot events; and "Summer after Fifth Year," which extend beyond the current state of the novel, but do not enter into events Rowling will likely cover once she picks up her pen again. The Sugar Quill holds writers to a strict and literal interpretation, insisting that the information they include in their stories be consistent with what Rowling has revealed. As the editor explains,

I don't write fanfic to "fix" things, I write it to explore corners that [the Harry Potter] canon didn't have the opportunity to peek into, or to speculate on what *might* have led up to something, or what *could* result from some other thing. A story that leaves these wonderful corners isn't a story

that needs fixing, it's a story that invites exploration, like those pretty little tree-lined side streets that you never get a chance to go down when you're on a bus, heading for work along the main drag. That doesn't mean there's anything wrong with the bus, with the main drag, or with going to work —it just means there's more down there to take a look at.[18]

Many adults worry that these kids are "copying" preexisting media content rather than creating their own original works. Instead, one should think about their appropriations as a kind of apprenticeship. Historically, young artists learned from established masters, sometimes contributing to the older artists' works, often following their patterns, before they developed their own styles and techniques. Our modern expectations about original expression are a difficult burden for anyone at the start of a career. In this same way, these young artists learn what they can from the stories and images that are most familiar to them. Building their first efforts upon existing cultural materials allows them to focus their energies elsewhere, mastering their craft, perfecting their skills, and communicating their ideas. Like many of the other young writers, Sweeney said that Rowling's books provided her the scaffolding she needed to focus on other aspects of the writing process: "It's easier to develop a good sense of plot and characterization and other literary techniques if your reader already knows something of the world where the story takes place." Sweeney writes mostly about the Hogwarts teachers, trying to tell the novels' events from their perspectives and exploring their relationships when they are not in front of the class. As she explains,

> I figure J. K. Rowling is going to take care of the student portion of the world as Harry gets to it. The problem with world building is that there is so much backstory to play with. I like filling in holes. . . . See if you can figure out a plausible way that would fit into the established canon to explain why Snape left Voldemort and went to serve Dumbledore. There are so many explanations for that but we don't know for sure yet, so when we find out, if we find out, there are going to be so many people reading for it and if someone gets it right, they are going to go, yes, I nailed it.

Others noted that writing about someone else's fictional characters, rather than drawing directly on their own experience, gave them some

critical distance to reflect on what they were trying to express. Sweeney described how getting inside the head of a character who was very different from herself helped her make sense of the people she saw around her in school who were coming from very different backgrounds and acting on very different values. She saw fan fiction, in that sense, as a useful resource for surviving high school. *Harry Potter* fan fiction yields countless narratives of youth empowerment as characters fight back against the injustices their writers encounter every day at school. Often, the younger writers show a fascination with getting inside the heads of the adult characters. Many of the best stories are told from teachers' perspectives or depict Harry's parents and mentors when they were school age. Some of the stories are sweetly romantic or bittersweet coming-of-age stories (where sexual consummation comes when two characters hold hands); others are charged with anger or budding sexual feelings, themes the authors say they would have been reluctant to discuss in a school assignment. When they discuss such stories, teen and adult fans talk openly about their life experiences, offering each other advice on more than just issues of plot or characterization.

Through online discussions of fan writing, the teen writers develop a vocabulary for talking about writing and learn strategies for rewriting and improving their own work. When they talk about the books themselves, they make comparisons with other literary works or draw connections with philosophical and theological traditions; they debate gender stereotyping in the female characters; they cite interviews with the writer or read critical analyses of the works; they use analytic concepts they probably wouldn't encounter until they reached the advanced undergraduate classroom.

Schools are still locked into a model of autonomous learning that contrasts sharply with the kinds of learning that are needed as students are entering the new knowledge cultures. Gee and other educators worry that students who are comfortable participating in and exchanging knowledge through affinity spaces are being deskilled as they enter the classroom:

> Learning becomes both a personal and unique trajectory through a complex space of opportunities (i.e., a person's own unique movement through various affinity spaces over time) and a social journey as one shares aspects of that trajectory with others (who may be very different from oneself and inhabit otherwise quite different spaces) for a shorter or

longer time before moving on. What these young people see in school may pale by comparison. It may seem to lack the imagination that infuses the non-school aspects of their lives. At the very least, they may demand an argument for "Why school?"[19]

Gee's focus is on the support system that emerges around the individual learner, Pierre Lévy's focus is on the ways that each learner contributes to the larger collective intelligence; but both are describing parts of the same experience—living in a world where knowledge is shared and where critical activity is ongoing and lifelong.

Not surprisingly, someone who has just published her first online novel and gotten dozens of letters of comment finds it disappointing to return to the classroom where her work is going to be read only by the teacher and feedback may be very limited. Some teens confessed to smuggling drafts of stories to school in their textbooks and editing them during class; others sit around the lunch table talking plot and character issues with their classmates or try to work on the stories on the school computers until the librarians accuse them of wasting time. They can't wait for the school bell to ring so they can focus on their writing.

Lawver was not the only one to see the educational payoff from fan writing. A number of libraries have brought in imaginary lecturers on muggle life or run weekend-long classes modeled after those taught at the remarkable school. A group of Canadian publishers organized a writing summer camp for children, designed to help them perfect their craft. The publishers were responding to the many unsolicited manuscripts they had received from Potter fans.[20] One educational group organized Virtual Hogwarts, which offered courses on both academic subjects and the topics made famous from Rowling's books. Adult teachers from four continents developed the online materials for thirty different classes, and the effort drew more than three thousand students from seventy-five nations.

It is not clear that the successes of affinity spaces can be duplicated by simply incorporating similar activities into the classroom. Schools impose a fixed leadership hierarchy (including very different roles for adults and teens); it is unlikely that someone like Heather or Flourish would have had the same editorial opportunities they have found through fandom. Schools have less flexibility to support writers at very different stages of their development. Even the most progressive schools set limits on what students can write compared to the freedom they enjoy on their own. Certainly, teens may receive harsh critical responses to their more controversial stories when they publish them online, but the teens themselves are deciding what risks they want to take and facing the consequences of those decisions.

That said, we need to recognize that improving writing skills is a secondary benefit of participating in the fan fiction writing community. Talking about fan fiction in these terms makes the activity seem more valuable to teachers or parents who may be skeptical of the worthiness of these activities. And the kids certainly take the craft of writing seriously and are proud of their literacy accomplishments. At the same time, the writing is valuable because of the ways it expands their experience of the world of *Harry Potter* and because of the social connections it facilitates with other fans. These kids are passionate about writing because they are passionate about what they are writing about. To some degree, pulling such activities into the schools is apt to deaden them because school culture generates a different mindset than our recreational life.

## Defense against Dark Arts

J. K. Rowling and Scholastic, her publisher, had initially signaled their support for fan writers, stressing that storytelling encouraged kids to expand their imaginations and empowered them to find their voices as writers. Through her London-based agent, the Christopher Little Literary Agency, Rowling had issued a statement in 2003 describing the author's long-standing policy of welcoming "the huge interest that her fans have in the series and the fact that it has led them to try their hand at writing."[21] When Warner Bros. bought the film rights in 2001, however, the stories entered a second and not so complimentary intellectual property regime.[22] The studio had a long-standing practice of seeking out Web sites whose domain names used copyrighted or trademarked phrases. Trademark law was set up to avoid "potential confusions" about who produces particular goods or content; Warner felt it had a legal obligation to police sites that emerged around their properties. The studio characterized this as a "sorting out" process in which each

site was suspended until the studio could assess what the site was do-
ing with the *Harry Potter* franchise. Diane Nelsen, senior vice president
of Warner Bros. Family Entertainment, explained:

> When we dug down under some of these domain names, we could see
> clearly who was creating a screen behind which they were exploiting our
> property illegally. With fans you did not have to go far to see that they
> were just fans and they were expressing something vital about their rela-
> tionship to this property. . . . You hate to penalize an authentic fan for the
> actions of an inauthentic fan, but we had enough instances of people who
> really were exploiting kids in the name of *Harry Potter.*

In many cases, the original site owner would be issued permission to
continue to use the site under the original name, but Warner Bros. re-
tained the right to shut it down if they found "inappropriate or offen-
sive content."

The fans felt slapped in the face by what they saw as the studio's
efforts to take control over their sites. Many of those caught up in these
struggles were children and teens, who had been among the most ac-
tive organizers of the *Harry Potter* fandom. Heather Lawver, the young
editor of *The Daily Prophet*, formed the American-based organization,
Defense Against the Dark Arts, when she learned that some fan friends
had been threatened with legal action: "Warner was very clever about
who they attacked. . . . They attacked a whole bunch of kids in Poland.
How much of a risk is that? They went after the 12 and 15 year olds
with the rinky-dink sites. They underestimated how interconnected our
fandom was. They underestimated the fact that we knew those kids in
Poland and we knew the rinky dink sites and we cared about them."
Heather herself never received a cease-and-desist letter, but she made
it her cause to defend friends who were under legal threats. In the
United Kingdom, fifteen-year-old Claire Field emerged as the poster
girl in the fans' struggle against Warner Bros. She and her parents had
hired a solicitor after she received a cease-and-desist letter for her site,
www.harrypotterguide.co.uk, and in the process, took the struggle to
the British media. Her story was reported worldwide, and in each loca-
tion other teen Webmasters who had been shut down by Warner's legal
representatives also came public.[23] Lawver joined forces with Field's
British supporters, helping to coordinate media outreach and activism
against the studio.

Defense Against Dark Arts argued that fans had helped to turn a little
known children's book into an international best-seller and that the
rights holders owed them some latitude to do their work. The petition
ends with a "call to arms" against studios that fail to appreciate their
supporters: "There are dark forces afoot, darker even than He-Who-
Must-Not-Be-Named, because these dark forces are daring to take away
something so basic, so human, that it's close to murder. They are taking
away our freedom of speech, our freedom to express our thoughts, feel-
ings, and ideas, and they are taking away the fun of a magical book."[24]
Lawver, the passionate and articulate teen, debated a Warner Bros.
spokesman on MSNBC's *Hardball with Chris Matthews* (1997). As Lawver
explained, "We weren't disorganized little kids anymore. We had a pub-
lic following and we had a petition with 1500 signatures in a matter of
two weeks. They [Warner Bros.] finally had to negotiate with us."

As the controversy intensified, Diane Nelson, senior vice president
of Warner Bros. Family Entertainment, publicly acknowledged that the
studio's legal response had been "naïve" and "an act of miscommuni-
cation."[25] Nelson, now executive vice president for Global Brand Man-
agement, told me, "We didn't know what we had on our hands early
on in dealing with *Harry Potter.* We did what we would normally do in
the protection of our intellectual property. As soon as we realized we
were causing consternation to children or their parents, we stopped it."
Out of the conflict, the studio developed a more collaborative policy for
engaging with *Harry Potter* fans, one similar to the ways that Lucas was
seeking to collaborate with *Star Wars* fan filmmakers:

> Heather is obviously a very smart young woman and did an effective job
> drawing attention to the issue. . . . She brought to our attention fans who
> she felt had been victims of these letters. We called them. In one instance,
> there was a young man she was holding up as a poster child for what we
> were doing wrong. He was a young man out of London. He and two of
> his friends from school had started a Triwizard Tournament on the inter-
> net. They were having contests through their sites. . . . Ultimately, what
> we did with them was the basis of what we did with subsequent fans. We
> deputized them. We ended up sponsoring their tournament and paying
> for their P.O. box for off line entries to this contest. . . . We were not at all
> opposed to his site or what he was doing on it or how he was expressing
> himself as a fan. In fact, we believed from day one that those sites were
> critical to the success of what we were doing and the more of them the

better. We ended up giving him official sanction and access to materials to include on the site so that we could keep him within the family and still protect *Harry Potter* materials appropriately.

Many *Potter* fans praised Warner for admitting its mistakes and fixing the problems in their relations with fans. Lawver remains unconvinced, seeing the outcome more as an attempt to score a public relations victory than any shift in their thinking. She has recently added a section to *The Daily Prophet* designed to provide resources for other fan communities that wish to defend themselves against studio restrictions on their expression and participation.[26]

Heather Lawver and her allies had launched their children's campaign against Warner Bros. under the assumption that such fan activism had a long history. She explained: "I figured with the history that *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* fan writers had, people would have done this before. I didn't think much of it. I thought we had precedence but apparently not." Other groups had tried, but not with nearly the same degree of success. After several decades of aggressive studio attention, there is literally no case law concerning fan fiction. The broad claims sometimes asserted by the studios have never been subjected to legal contestation. Studios threaten, fans back down, and none of the groups that would normally step forward to defend free expression rights consider it part of their agenda to defend amateur creators. Free-speech organizations, including the American Civil Liberties Union and the Electronic Frontier Foundation, joined Muggles for Harry Potter, a group created to support teachers who wanted to keep the *Harry Potter* books in the classroom, but failed to defend the fan fiction writers who asserted their rights to build their fantasies around Rowling's novel. The Stanford Center for Internet and Society posted a statement—explicitly supportive, implicitly condescending—about fan fiction on its Chilling Effects Web site (http://www.chillingeffects.org/fanfic). The statement in effect concedes most of the claims made by the studio attorneys.[27] Adopting a similar position, Electronic Frontier Foundation chairman of the board Brad Templeton writes, "Almost all 'fan fiction' is arguably a copyright violation. If you want to write a story about Jim Kirk and Mr. Spock, you need Paramount's permission, pure and simple."[28] Note how Templeton moves from legal hedge words like "arguably" in the first sentence to the moral certainty of "plain and simple" by the second. With friends like these, who needs enemies?

The fan community includes plenty of lawyers, some informed, some otherwise, who have been willing to step up where the public interest groups have failed, and to offer legal advice to fans about how to contest efforts to shut down their Web sites.[29] Fan activists, for example, support Writers University, a Web site that, among other services, provides periodic updates on how a range of different media franchises and individual authors have responded to fan fiction, identifying those who welcome and those who prohibit participation.[30] The site's goal is to allow fans to make an informed choice about the risks they face in pursuing their hobbies and interests. Legal scholars Rosemary J. Coombe and Andrew Herman note that fans have found posting their cease-and-desist letters on the Web to be an effective tactic, one that forces media companies to publicly confront the consequences of their actions, and one that helps fans see the patterns of legal action that might otherwise be felt only by those Webmistresses directly involved.[31]

Nobody is sure whether fan fiction falls under current fair-use protections. Current copyright law simply doesn't have a category for dealing with amateur creative expression. Where there has been a "public interest" factored into the legal definition of fair use—such as the desire to protect the rights of libraries to circulate books or journalists to quote or academics to cite other researchers—it has been advanced in terms of legitimated classes of users and not a generalized public right to cultural participation. Our current notion of fair use is an artifact of an era when few people had access to the marketplace of ideas, and those who did fell into certain professional classes. It surely demands close reconsideration as we develop technologies that broaden who may produce and circulate cultural materials. Judges know what to do with people who have professional interests in the production and distribution of culture; they don't know what to do with amateurs, or people they deem to be amateurs.

Industry groups have tended to address copyright issues primarily through a piracy model, focusing on the threat of file sharing, rather than dealing with the complexities of fan fiction. Their official educational materials have been criticized for focusing on copyright protections to the exclusion of any reference to fair use. By implication, fans are seen simply as "pirates" who steal from the studios and give nothing in return. Studios often defend their actions against fans on the grounds that if they do not actively enforce their copyrights they will be vulnerable to commercial competitors encroaching on their content.

The best legal solution to this quagmire may be to rewrite fair-use protections to legitimate grassroots, not-for-profit circulation of critical essays, and stories that comment on the content of mass media. Companies certainly are entitled to protect their rights against encroachment from commercial competitors, yet under the current system, because other companies know how far they can push and are reluctant to sue each other, they often have greater latitude to appropriate and transform media content than amateurs, who do not know their rights and have little legal means to defend them even if they did. One paradoxical result is that works that are hostile to the original creators and thus can be read more explicitly as making critiques of the source material may have greater freedom from copyright enforcement than works that embrace the ideas behind the original work and simply seek to extend them in new directions. A story where Harry and the other students rose up to overthrow Dumbledore because of his paternalistic policies is apt to be recognized by a judge as political speech and parody, whereas a work that imagines Ron and Hermione going on a date may be so close to the original that its status as criticism is less clear and is apt to be read as infringement.

In the short run, change is more likely to occur by shifting the way studios think about fan communities than reshaping the law, and that's why the collaborative approaches we've seen across the past two chapters seem like important steps in redefining the space of amateur participation. Nelson said that the *Harry Potter* controversy was instrumental in starting conversations within the studio between business, public relations, creative, and legal department staffers, about what principles should govern their relations with their fans and supporters: "We are trying to balance the needs of other creative stakeholders, as well as the fans, as well as our own legal obligations, all within an arena which is new and changing and there are not clear precedents about how things should be interpreted or how they would be acted upon if they ever reached the courts."

In the course of the interview, she described fans as "core shareholders" in a particular property and the "life blood" of the franchise. The studio needed to find ways to respect the "creativity and energy" these fans brought behind a franchise, even as they needed to protect the franchise from encroachment from groups who wanted to profit for their efforts, to respond quickly to misinformation, or, in the case of

material aimed at the youth market, to protect children from access to mature content. As far as fan fiction goes,

> We recognize that it is the highest compliment in terms of the fans inserting themselves into the property and wanting to express their love for it. We are very respectful of what that means. There is a degree to which fan fiction is acceptable to authors and there is a degree to which it moves into a place where it does not feel appropriate, respectful, or within the rights of fans. A lot has to do with how a fan wants to publish and whether they want to benefit commercially off of that fan fiction. If it is purely just an expression for others to read and experience and appreciate, I think that is generally pretty tolerable by a studio rights holder and a creator. The more broadly the fan wants to see that fan fiction disseminated or trade upon it for revenue, promotion, or publicity, the less tolerant the studio or creator might be.

But, as Nelson acknowledged, the fan's "sense of ownership over a particular property" posed challenges for the studio:

> When we stray from the source material or what fans perceive as the true roots of a property, we are under their scrutiny. They can become either advocates for what we are doing or strong dissenters. They can shift the tide of how a property is introduced into the market place depending on whether they perceive us as having presented it carefully, respectfully, and accurately. . . . Fans may be trying to promote the property on the internet in their terms but they can sometimes compromise our responsibility to protect that intellectual property so as to keep it pure and to keep our legal rights in tact.

There is still—and perhaps may always be—a huge gap between the studio's assumptions about what constitutes appropriate fan participation and the fans' own sense of moral "ownership" over the property. The studios are now, for the most part, treating cult properties as "love marks" and fans as "inspirational consumers" whose efforts help generate broader interests in their properties. Establishing the fans' loyalty often means lessening traditional controls that companies might exert over their intellectual properties and thus opening up a broader space for grassroots creative expression.

## Muggles for *Harry Potter*

Studio attorneys were not the only group that posed a threat to children's rights to participate in the world of *Harry Potter*. The *Harry Potter* books have been at the center of more textbook and library controversies over the past several years than any other book. In 2002, they were the focus of more than five hundred "challenges" at schools and libraries around the country.[32] In Lawrence, Kansas, for example, the Oskaloosa Public Library was forced to cancel plans for a special "Hogwarts class" for "aspiring young witches and wizards" because parents in the community thought the local librarian was trying to recruit children into demon worship. Paula Ware, the librarian who proposed the class, quickly backed down: "It's my busiest time of the year, and I don't want to enter into a confrontation. But if this had been about banning the books, I would have taken this to the Supreme Court."[33] In Alamogordo, New Mexico, the Christ Community Church burned more than thirty Harry Potter books, along with DVDs of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), CDs by Eminem, and novels by Stephen King. Jack Brock, the pastor of the church, justified the book burning on the grounds that *Harry Potter*, a book he admitted he had not read, was "a masterpiece of satanic deception" and an instruction manual into the dark arts.[34] CNN quoted another minister, Reverend Lori Jo Scheppers, who suggested that children exposed to *Harry Potter* would "have a very good chance of becoming another Dylan Klebold and those guys in Columbine."[35]

So far, we have been focused on participation as a positive force in the lives of these kids—something that is motivating children to read, write, form communities, and master other kinds of content—not to mention, stand up for their rights. Yet, as we turn our attention to some of *Harry Potter*'s conservative critics, participation takes on altogether more sinister connotations. Evangelist Phil Arms, for example, describes *Harry Potter* and *Pokémon* (1998) as "fatal attractions" drawing children toward the realm of the occult: "Sooner or later, all who enter the world of *Harry Potter* must meet the true face behind the veil. And when they do, they discover what all those who toy with evil discover, and that is, that while they may have been just playing, the Devil always plays for keeps."[36] The moral reformers cite the example of kids dressing up like Harry Potter, putting a magic sorting cap on their heads in an imitation of the book's initiation ritual, or drawing lightning bolts on their foreheads to duplicate Harry's scar, as evidence that children are moving from reading the books into participating in occult activities. Tapping deep-seated anxieties about theatricality and role-playing, Arms and his allies worry that immersion into fictional worlds may amount to a form of "astral projection"[37] or that when we speak words of magic, the demon forces that we summon do not necessarily realize that we are only pretending. These conservative critics warn that the compelling experiences of popular culture can override real-world experiences until children are no longer able to distinguish between fact and fantasy. For some, this level of engagement is enough to leave the *Harry Potter* books suspect: "These books are read over and over by children in the same way the Bible should be read."[38]

More generally, they are concerned about the immersive and expansive nature of the imaginary worlds being constructed in contemporary media franchises. Another evangelist, Berit Kjos, compares the *Harry Potter* books with *Dungeons and Dragons* (1975) in that regard:

1. Both immerse their fans in a plausible, well-developed fantasy world, replete with an evolving history, a carefully mapped geography, and wizards that model the thrill-packed and power-filled way of the mythical shaman.
2. In this fantasy world, adults and children alike are led into imagined experiences that create memories, build new values, guide their thinking and mold their understanding of reality.[39]

Here, the conservative critics seem to be taking aim at the very concept of transmedia storytelling—seeing the idea of world making as dangerous in itself insofar as it encourages us to invest more time mastering the details of a fictional environment and less time confronting the real world.

If these religious reformers are concerned about the immersive qualities of *Harry Potter*, they are equally concerned about its intertextuality. Kjos warns us:

The main product marketed through this movie is a belief system that clashes with everything God offers us for our peace and security. This pagan ideology comes complete with trading cards, computer and other wizardly games, clothes and decorations stamped with HP symbols, action figures and cuddly dolls and audio cassettes that could keep the

child's minds focused on the occult all day and into night. But in God's eyes, such paraphernalia become little more than lures and doorways to deeper involvement with the occult.[40]

In particular, they argue that Rowling makes more than sixty specific references in the first four books to actual occult practices and personages from the history of alchemy and witchcraft. They identify some historical and literary allusions Rowling intended to be recognized by literate readers, such as her reference to Nicolas Flamel, the medieval alchemist who is credited with discovering the Sorcerer's Stone or to Merlin and Morgana from the Arthurian romances as figures on the wizards' collectors' cards. But some fundamentalist critics read the lightning bolt on Harry's forehead as the "mark of the beast" or map Voldemort onto "the nameless one," an anti-Christian witch, both foretold in *Revelations.* They contend that children seeking additional information will be drawn toward pagan works that promise more knowledge and power. One Catholic writer explains: "When he has finished reading the *Potter* series, what will he turn to? There is a vast industry turning out sinister material for the young that will feed their growing appetites."[41] In fairness, librarians and educators tap many of these same intertextual references. For example, among the courses offered at Virtual Hogwarts are classes in fortunetelling, astrology, and alchemy, taught no doubt as historical beliefs and practices, but nevertheless deeply offensive to fundamentalists.

These moral reformers agree that the books are sparking literacy and learning, but they are anxious about what kids are being taught. Some activists see the books as a dilution of Christian influence on American culture in favor of a new global spiritualism. Kjos warns that "the *Harry Potter* books would not have been culturally acceptable half a century ago. Today's cultural climate—an 'open-mindedness' toward occult entertainment together with 'closed-mindedness' toward Biblical Christianity—was planned a century ago. It was outlined by the United Nations in the late 1940s and has been taught and nurtured through the developing global education system during the last six decades."[42] Whereas a generation ago these groups might have taken aim at secular humanism, they now see a new phase of globalization during which multinational companies and supranational organizations are actively erasing cultural differences. To reach a global market, these Christian critics argue, American capitalism must strip aside the last vestiges of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and to promote consumerism, it must erode away all resistance to temptation. Aspects of pagan and Eastern faiths are entering classrooms in a secularized form—the worship of the earth transformed into ecology, astral projection into visualization exercises—while Christianity remains locked outside by advocates of the separation of church and state. The *Harry Potter* books are, as a consequence, going to have very different effects than, say, *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), which was read by children within a deeply Christian culture. Instead, the fundamentalists warn, American children are susceptible to the pagan influences of these books because they are consumed alongside television shows like *Pokémon* (1998) or read in schools that already have a global and secular curriculum.

If some adults, like Paula Ware, were simply "too busy" to defend *Harry Potter* against these would-be censors, many teachers risked their jobs defending the books. Mary Dana, a middle school teacher in Zeeland, Michigan, was one of the educators who found herself caught up in these debates.[43] Dana had come to teaching as a second career after having spent more than a decade as an independent bookseller. She had weathered a range of previous controversies about books she had brought into this community. She drew a line in 2000 when the local superintendent decided that *Harry Potter* books should be outlawed from public readings, removed from the open shelves of the school library, barred from future purchase, and left accessible only to students who had written permission from their parents. Dana explains: "I don't like confrontations and I don't like to speak in public. I'm a pretty shy person actually. I had plenty of experience of First Amendment challenges when we owned our bookstore. I had been under attack before. It was a very ugly difficult experience, but ultimately, when you think you just can't fight them, you still have to because they are wrong. . . . I wasn't going to let it drop." Like Lawver, Dana saw the potential of the *Harry Potter* books to excite kids about reading and learning; she felt that such books needed to be in the classroom.

Working with a local parent, Nancy Zennie, Dana organized opposition to the superintendent's decision, helping to frame and circulate petitions, organize rallies, and pull people to a school board meeting where the issue was going to be discussed. Trying to rally public support, Dana and Zennie helped to create an organization, Muggles for Harry Potter, which could tap national and international fan interest. They were joined by a group of eight organizations, representing book-

sellers, publishers, librarians, teachers, writers, civil libertarians, and consumers. "Muggles for Harry Potter is fighting for the right of students and teachers to use the best books that are available for children, even when some parents object," said Christopher Finan, president of the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression. "The Potter books are helping turn video-game players into readers. We can't allow censorship to interfere with that."[44] In the end, the school board removed many of the restrictions placed on the books, though the ban on reading them in the classroom remained.

Over the next nine months, over 18,000 people joined the Muggles campaign through its Web site, and the group has been credited with curbing the nationwide efforts of fundamentalists to get the books banned from schools.[45] The organization sought to teach young readers of the *Harry Potter* books about the importance of standing up for free expression. The organization, which later changed its name to kidSPEAK! (www.kidspeakonline.org), created online forums where kids could share their views with one another about the Potter wars and other censorship issues. For example, Jaclyn, a seventh-grader, wrote this response to news that a fundamentalist minister had cut up copies of *Harry Potter* when the fire department refused to grant him a permit to have a book burning:

> Reverend Taylor, the host of Jesus Party should look closer before judging. Kids are reading these books and discovering there is more to life than going to school. What have they discovered exactly? Their imaginations. Does Reverend Doug Taylor realize what he is doing? Kids are fighting for their First Amendment rights but do they also have the fight for their imaginations—the one thing that keeps one person different than the others? We stand back and watch him rip the books to shreds, almost symbolically, ripping up our imaginations. Children like the books because they want to live in that world, they want to see magic, not see some phony magician pull a rabbit out of his hat. They want to have a brave friend like Harry Potter and ride across the dark lake where the giant squid lurks to the grand castle of Hogwarts. Although they want to do all of these things, they know Hogwarts isn't real and Harry Potter does not exist.

One of the striking features of the discussions on kidSPEAK is how often the kids are forced to recant their fantasies in order to defend their right

to have them in the first place. Here's another example: "And another thing Anti-*Harry Potter* people it is FICTION get that entirely made up except like the setting (England) and the places (Kings Cross Station) etc. But I seriously doubt if you go to London you'll find The Leaky Cauldron or a Wizard. That's what fiction is—made up. So all you people against *Harry Potter*. Get over it."[46]

The fundamentalists claim that fantastical representations of violence or the occult shaped children's beliefs and actions in the real world. Countering such claims, the books' defenders were forced to argue that fantasies do not really matter, when in fact, what we have said so far suggests that the immersive quality of the books is what makes them such a powerful catalyst for creative expression. Even the name of the organization suggests uncertainty about what kind of relationship the adults wanted to foster to the books' fantasy. Dana explained: "The term refers to anyone who does not possess the magical powers. Anyone who is not a wizard by definition has to be a muggle. Of course, it was somewhat amusing because if people weren't willing to say they were muggles then what were they saying, that they had witchcraft powers." On the one hand, the name does tap fannish knowledge: only those people familiar with Rowling's world would recognize the term. On the other hand, adopting a muggle identity aligned participants with the mundane world. Rowling is merciless in making fun of the closed-mindedness of the Dursleys, Harry's adopted family. The Dursleys are totally uncomfortable with his special abilities and kept him literally closeted. The contrast between the group's embrace of muggleness and the fantastical identifications Lawver had enabled through *The Daily Prophet* could not be starker. The educators, librarians, and publishers saw the books as a means to an end—a way of getting kids excited about reading—whereas for the fans, reading and writing was the means to their end, having a more deeply engaged relationship with the world of Hogwarts.

The conservative Christians are simply the most visible of a broad range of groups, each citing their own ideological concerns that are reacting to a shift in the media paradigm. Anti–*Harry Potter* Christians share many concerns with other reform groups linking worries about the persuasive power of advertising to concerns about the demonic nature of immersion, tapping anxieties about consumerism and multinational capitalism in their critiques of global spiritualism. In *Plenitude* (1998), Grant McCracken talks about the "withering of the witherers,"

that is, the breakdown of the power traditional groups exercise over cultural expression.[47] Corporate gatekeepers, educational authorities, and church leaders all represent different forces that historically held in check tendencies toward diversification and fragmentation. Over the past several decades, McCracken argues, these groups have lost their power to define cultural norms as the range of different media and communication channels have expanded. Ideas and practices that were once hidden from public view—say, the Wiccan beliefs that fundamentalist critics claim are shaping the *Harry Potter* books—are now entering the mainstream, and these groups are struggling to police the culture that comes into their own homes and communities.

If educational reformers such as James Gee hope to break the stranglehold formal education has on children's learning and to expand the opportunities for children to practice literacy outside the classroom, these voices are more cautious, trying to reassert traditional values and structures in a world they can no longer fully control. We see this impulse to restore the "witherers" when we look at battles to enforce ratings on video games or to ban the *Harry Potter* books from schools. Where some see a world more free from gatekeepers, they see a world where the floodgates have opened and no one can control the flow of "raw sewage" into their homes. Such groups want to assert a collective response to problems individual parents feel unable to confront on their own. Echoing concerns expressed by many secular parents, these fundamentalist critics contend that the pervasiveness of modern media makes it hard for parents to respond to its messages. As Michael O'Brien protests, "Our culture is continuously pushing us to let down our guard, to make quick judgments that feel easier because they reduce the tension of vigilance. The harassed pace and the high volume of consumption that modern culture seems to demand of us, makes genuine discernment more difficult."[48]

## What Would Jesus Do with *Harry Potter*?

We would be wrong to assume that the Potter wars represented a struggle of conservative Christians against liberal educators and fans. If some simply want to reinscribe old authorities and build up the institutions being challenged by a more participatory culture, others want to help children learn to make judgments about media content. Many Christian groups defended the books, presenting the concept of "discernment" as an alternative to culture war discourse. Connie Neal, the author of *What's a Christian to Do with Harry Potter?*, framed the choices in terms of "building a wall" to protect children from outside influences or "fitting them with armor" so that they can bring their own values with them when they encounter popular culture. Neal notes that "restricting freedom can incite curiosity and rebellion, leading the one you're trying to protect to try to get past the protective barrier to see what he or she is missing. . . . Even if you could keep children separated from all potentially dangerous influences, you would also be keeping them from a situation in which they could develop the maturity to ward off such dangers for themselves."[49] Instead, Neal advocates giving children media literacy skills, teaching them to evaluate and interpret popular culture within a Christian framework.

One discernment group, Ransom Fellowship, defines discernment as "an ability, by God's grace, to creatively chart a godly path through the maze of choices and options that confront us, even when were faced with situations and issues that aren't specifically mentioned in the Scriptures."[50] The discernment movement draws inspiration from a range of biblical passages that speak of people who maintained their faith even when living in an alien land. Christians, they argue, are living in "modern captivity," holding on to and transmitting their faith in an increasingly hostile context.

In "Pop Culture: Why Bother?" Denis Haack, the founder and director of the Ransom Fellowship, argues that engaging with, rather than hiding from, popular culture has important benefits. Discernment exercises can help Christians develop a greater understanding of their own value system, can provide insights

**The Christian Counterculture**

Rather than rejecting popular culture outright, a growing number of Christians are producing and consuming their own popular media on the fringes of the mainstream entertainment industry. While many Christians have felt cut off from mass media, they have been quick to embrace new technologies—such as videotape, cable television, low-wattage radio stations, and the Internet—that allow them to route around established gatekeepers. The result has been the creation of media products that mirror the genre conventions of popular culture but express an alternative set of values. In *Shaking the World for Jesus* (2004), Heather Hendershot offers a complex picture of the kinds of popular culture being produced by and for evangelicals.[1] Frustrated by network television, cultural conservatives have created their own animated series and sitcoms distributed on video. They have produced their own science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance novels, all of which can be purchased online. And alarmed by contemporary video games, they have produced their own, such as *Victory at Hebron* (2003),

[1] Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

where players battle Satan or rescue martyrs.

The emergence of new media technologies has allowed evangelicals some degree of autonomy from commercial media, allowing them to identify and enjoy media products that more closely align with their own worldviews. Technology has also lowered the costs of production and distribution, enabling what remains essentially a niche market to sustain a remarkably broad range of cultural products. Of course, as "niche markets" go, this one may be astonishingly large. According to a 2002 ABC News/Beliefnet poll, 83 percent of Americans consider themselves to be Christians, and Baptists (only one of the evangelical denominations) make up 15 percent of the nation.[2]

As commercial media producers have realized the size of this demographic, the walls between Christian and mainstream popular culture are breaking down. *VeggieTales* (1994) videos are finding their way into Wal-Mart, Focus on the Family's *Adventures in Odyssey* (1991) records get distributed as kids' meal prizes at Chick-fil-A, the *Left Behind* (1996) books become top sellers on Amazon.com, and Christian pop singer Amy Grant breaks into Top 40 radio. In the process, some of the more overtly religious markings get stripped away. Network television has begun to produce some shows, such as *Touched by an Angel* (1994), *7th Heaven* (1996), and *Joan of Arcadia* (2003), that deal with religious themes in a way designed to appeal to the "searchers" and the "saved" alike. Predictably, some evangelicals fear that Christianity has

[2] Gary Langer, "Poll: Most Americans Say They're Christian," *ABC News*, July 18, 2002, http://abcnews .go.com/sections/us/DailyNews/beliefnet_poll_ -1-718.html.

into the worldview of "nonbelievers," and can offer an opportunity for meaningful exchange between Christians and non-Christians. According to Haack, "If we are to understand those who do not share our deepest convictions, we must gain some comprehension of what they believe, why they believe it, and how those beliefs work out in daily life."[51] Their site provides discussion questions and advice about how to foster media literacy within an explicitly religious context, finding ideas worth struggling with in mainstream works as diverse as *Bruce Almighty* (2003), *Cold Mountain* (2003), and *Lord of the Rings* (2001). The Oracle in *The Matrix* (1999) is compared to a biblical prophet; viewers are invited to reflect on the role of prayer in the *Spider-Man* (2002) movies and on the kinds of "great responsibilities" Christians bear; and they are encouraged to show sympathy toward the spiritual quests undertaken by indigenous people in *Whale Rider* (2002) or by Bill Murray's character in *Lost in Translation* (2003). The site is very explicit that Christians are apt to disagree among themselves about what is or what is not valuable in such works, but that the process of talking through these differences focuses energy on spiritual matters and helps everyone involved to become more skillful in applying and defending their faith.

Whereas some cultural conservatives saw the immersiveness of contemporary popular culture as ensnaring young people in a dangerous realm of fantasies, some within the discernment movement

have promoted the use of live action role-playing and computer games as spaces for exploring and debating moral questions. The Christian Gamers Guild (whose monthly newsletter is known as *The Way, The Truth & The Dice*) emerged in the midst of strong attacks from some evangelical leaders on role-playing and computer games. As they turn their attention toward games, they take this concept of discernment one step further—arguing that individual game masters (the people who "run" live action role-playing games) have the power to appropriate and transform these cultural materials according to their own beliefs. They are, to borrow the name of another group, Fans for Christ (FFC).

Groups like Fans for Christ and Anime Angels define themselves within the same kind of identity-politics language that sustains gay, lesbian, and bisexual or feminist Christian organizations. The FAQ for FFC explains:

> We have been alone too long! There are many of us fans out there who feel *different* because we are what we are. Some call us freaks, weirdoes, geeks, nerds, whatever. FFC is here for all of you to talk with your brothers and sisters who are Christians and share your freakiness. . . . You are welcome here to be as freaky and geeky as you like. . . . FFC is here to help show that our fan lifestyle is perfectly acceptable to Jesus. We hope to help our FFC members be able to explain clearly to others that the Bible does not condemn what we do, that

been commodified and that Jesus is becoming just another brand in the great big "marketplace of ideas."

It is in this context that we need to understand the staggering success of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). The Christians knew how to get folks into the theater to support this film. For example, Gibson sought out the services of Faith Highway, a group that had previously produced public service messages that local churches could sponsor through local cable outlets to give their messages a more professional polish. Faith Highway urged churches to help raise money to support advertisements for the film and to link them back to their local messages. Many churches loaded up school buses full of worshippers to attend screenings and, with the release of the DVD, put together bulk orders to get the film into the hands of their congregations. Some church leaders have acknowledged backing this film in hopes that its commercial success will get Hollywood to pay attention to them. Faith Highway's CEO Dennis Dautel explained: "The leaders in the church are chomping at the bits to get media that is relevant to their message. Hollywood doesn't produce it. . . . The congregations went behind it because they wanted to see people turn out and see that movie. There was a strong desire in the Christian community for that movie to be a home run. This was our *Passion*."[3]

The *Harry Potter* controversy was fueled by these alternative media channels. While many of the mainstream televangelists and radiocasters, such as Charles Colson and James Dobson, made their peace with Rowling's universe, either endorsing it outright or urging parents to proceed

[3] Dennis Dautel, personal interview, Fall 2004.

with caution,[4] the anti-Potter voices most often came from new ministries that had staked a space for themselves on the Internet. They used the debate to strike back at what they saw as a theological establishment. One such site, Trumpet Ministries, went so far as to denounce Colson and Dobson as "modern day Judas Iscariots" because of their refusal to join the campaign against the books.[5] Just as the fluidity of culture has allowed youth greater access to pagan beliefs than ever before, it also meant that small-scale ministries could exert worldwide influence by posting their sermons and critiques from the national hinterland. Similarly, smaller video production companies, such as Jeremiah Films, could produce DVD documentaries with titles such as *Harry Potter: Witchcraft Repackaged* (2001) and sell them to concerned parents via the Web or infomercials on late-night cable.

The evangelical community sought to identify some Christian fantasy writers as alternatives to *Harry Potter*. Following in the tradition of Lewis and Tolkien, G. P. Taylor, an Anglican vicar, used his fantasy novel, *Shadowmancer* (2004), to explore moral and theological questions. The book outpaced *Harry Potter* for fifteen weeks in the United Kingdom and held six straight weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list in the summer of 2004. The book was heavily promoted through Christian media, including Pat Robertson's "The 700 Club" and James Dobson's "Focus on the Family" as "just the thing to counter Harry

[4] For a range of Christian response, see Neal, *What's a Christian to Do?* See also "Opinion Roundup: Positive about Potter," Christianity Today, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1999/150/12.0.html.
[5] "Harry Potter? What Does God Have to Say?" http://www.lasttrumpetministries.org/tracts/tract7.html.

we know that fiction is fiction, and that God has made us different and it is wonderful.[52]

The site provides a list of "fan friendly" churches that respects their lifestyle choices and values their unique perspectives on spiritual issues. In return, the members pledge to share their love of Christ with other fans, to hold their own gatherings to promote Christian fantasy and science fiction authors, and to write their own fan stories that address central religious concerns.

Many leaders of the discernment movement are less celebratory of the "geeky and freaky" aspects of popular culture, but they do see the value in appropriating and rethinking works of popular culture. Many discernment advocates regard the *Harry Potter* books as the perfect opening for parents to talk with their children about the challenges of preserving their values in a secular society. Haack explains:

Truth is taught here, truth that is worth some reflection and discussion, and though it is taught in an imaginary world, it applies to reality as well. . . . The world in which Harry Potter lives is a world of moral order, where ideas and choices have consequences, where good and evil are clearly distinguished, where evil is both dehumanizing and destructive, and where death is distressingly real. . . . Even if what all the critics say were true, the defensiveness of their recommendations is frankly

embarrassing. If the *Harry Potter* novels were introductions to the occult, the church should welcome the opportunity to read and discuss them. Neo-paganism is a growing reality in our post-Christian world, and our children need to be able to meet its challenge with a quiet confidence in the gospel. They need to know the difference between fantasy literature and the occult. And they need to see their elders acting righteously, not scandalously.[53]

Few discernment advocates go as far as Heather Lawver does in inviting children to adopt fantasy roles and play within the world of the story, but some do appropriate the books to speak to Christian values. Connie Neal asks Christian parents to consider what Jesus would do confronted with these stories:

Jesus might read the *Harry Potter* stories and use them as starting points for parables. . . . Just as Jesus noticed and met others' physical needs, he might attend to the earthly needs revealed in the lives of those who identify with the characters in *Harry Potter*. He might get them talking about *Harry Potter* and listen to what they identify with most: neglect, poverty, discrimination, abuse, fears, dreams, the pressures to fit in, desires to accomplish something in life, or the stresses of school. Then he would show them how to deal with such real parts of their lives.[54]

Rather than ban content that does not fully fit within their worldview, the discernment movement teaches Christian children and parents how to read those books critically, how to ascribe new meanings to them, and how to use them as points of entry into alternative spiritual perspectives.

Rather than shut down the intertextuality that is so rampant in the era of transmedia storytelling, Neal, Haack, and the other discernment leaders are looking for ways to harness its power. They provide reading lists for parents who want to build on their children's interests in *Harry Potter* as a point of entry into Christian fantasy. Several discern-

Potter's magic." *Shadowmancer* broke into Christian bookstores that normally did not carry fantasy books, and from there made it into secular bookstores that still don't carry large amounts of spiritual fiction. The film rights were quickly optioned by Fortitude Films, a group formed to support Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, and there has been some speculation that Gibson may direct the film adaptation. For his part, Taylor has been explicit that he wrote the book to show children God's power and not as an alternative to the *Harry Potter* books, which he claims not to have read.[6]

[6] Dinitia Smith, "*Harry Potter* Inspires a Christian Alternative," *New York Times*, July 24, 2004, A15.

ment groups published study guides to accompany the *Harry Potter* books and films with "probing questions" designed to explore the moral choices the characters made coupled with Bible verses that suggest how the same decisions are confronted within the Christian tradition. They focus, for example, on the moment when Harry's mother sacrifices her life to protect him as representing a positive role model for Christian love, or they discuss the corrupt moral choices that led to the creation of the Sorcerer's Stone as an example of sin. If the anti–*Harry Potter* Christians want to protect children from any exposure to those dangerous books, the discernment movement focuses on the agency of consumers to appropriate and transform media content

As we can see, the conflicts that gave rise to the Potter Wars do not reduce themselves to evil censors and good defenders of civil liberties. The churn created by a convergence culture does not allow us to operate with this degree of moral certainty. All of those groups are struggling with the immersive nature and expansive quality of the new entertainment franchises. In the age of media convergence, consumer participation has emerged as the central conceptual problem: traditional gatekeepers seek to hold onto their control of cultural content, and other groups—fans, civil libertarians, and the Christian discernment movement—want to give consumers the skills they need to construct their own culture. For some, such as Heather Lawver or James Gee, role-playing and fan fiction writing are valuable because they allow kids to understand the books from the inside out; such activities involve a negotiation between self-expression and shared cultural materials, between introspection and collaborative fantasy building. Others, such as the Fans for Christ or the Christian gamers, embrace these activities because they allow players and writers to explore moral options, to test their values against fictional obstacles, and to work through in an imaginative way challenges that would have much higher stakes in their everyday lives. For still others, such as the conservative Christians who opposed the teaching of the books, role-playing and shared fantasies are dangerous because they distract youth from serious moral education and leave them susceptible to the appeals of pagan groups and occult practices. Yet, in some ways, groups such as Muggles for Harry Potter seemed to share their concern that fantasy may itself be dangerous for kids, especially if they are unable to discern what separates the imaginative realm from reality.

We can read this debate as a reaction against many of the properties of convergence culture we have seen so far—against the expansion of fictional realms across multiple media, against the desire to master the arcane details of those texts and turn them into resources for a more participatory culture. For some, the concern is with the specific content of those fantasies—whether they are consistent with a Christian worldview. For others, the concern is with the marketing of those fantasies to children—whether we want opportunities for participation to be commodified. Ironically, at the same time, corporations are anxious about this fantasy play because it operates outside their control.

Unlike many previous fights over children's culture, however, this is not a story of children as passive victims of adult attempts at regulation and restraint. They are active participants in these new media landscapes, finding their own voice through their participation in fan communities, asserting their own rights even in the face of powerful entities, and sometimes sneaking behind their parents' back to do what feels right to them. At the same time, through their participation, these kids are mapping out new strategies for negotiating around and through globalization, intellectual property struggles, and media conglomeration. They are using the Internet to connect with children worldwide and, through that process, finding common interests and forging political alliances. Because the *Harry Potter* fandom involved both adults and children, it became a space where conversations could occur across generations. In talking about media pedagogies, then, we should no longer imagine this as a process where adults teach and children learn. Rather, we should see it as increasingly a space where children teach one another and where, if they would open their eyes, adults could learn a great deal.