Framing the Fictional

Making sense of Tumblr media fandom in everyday life

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: STUDYING ONLINE FANDOM FROM A LIVED RELIGION PERSPECTIVE

1.1 MAKING MEANING FROM FICTION

In today's society, the number of fictional worlds presented to us via books, films, television and video games is overwhelming. Through contemporary (trans)media[1] we encounter countless fantasy worlds, intergalactic realms, alternative universes and secret societies that, although explicitly marked as not referring to the 'real' world[2], have their own stories to tell and their own heroes and antagonists to identify with or learn from. The daily consumption of such media texts[3] has been accepted as an integral aspect of modern life and many fictional worlds have become part of a shared popular culture. In addition, fannish engagement with fictional worlds has steadily become more and more visible in and influential to our mainstream media culture.[4] Online technologies and social media platforms take centre stage in these developments as the spaces where people can come together to discuss, explore and elaborate fictional worlds. Where once the letter pages in fiction magazines formed spaces that fans could inhabit and share, nowadays the communal imagination largely takes place via technologically mediated interfaces that provide users with a plethora of sensory stimuli through which virtual and fictional worlds can come to life.[5]

In a society where the engagement with fictional worlds and stories has become a common pastime, it comes as no surprise that scholars from a wide range of fields have asked questions about the ways in which fictional worlds relate to the lived reality of their authors and audiences. For example, anthropologists have traced how media are integrated into the everyday lives of producers and

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[1] The phenomenon 'transmedia' refers to mediated stories that are spread across multiple media platforms in a complementary way. Famous examples are *Harry Potter, The Matrix,* and *Halo*. Rachel Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality* (London/New York: Routledge, 2012), 212.

[2] To be precise, I understand a fictional world to be a world that is build or presented in a narrative that is not intended by its author(s) to refer to the 'real' world—it is explicitly marked as fictional. This definition is based on Markus Davidsen's definition of fiction (which in turn represents the accepted technical meaning of the term in literary studies): 'any literary narrative which is not intended by its author to refer to events which have taken place in the actual world prior to being entextualised.' Markus Altena Davidsen, "Fiction-based Religion: Conceptualising a New Category Against History-based Religion and Fandom," *Culture and Religion* 14(4) (2013): 384. The concept of 'fictional world' (as I use it) is largely synonymous with for example J.R.R. Tolkien's (1947) notion of 'Secondary World' (as opposed to our 'Primary World') and Michael Saler's 'imaginary world' (as opposed to 'the real'). As Saler points out, fictional worlds are not necessarily *completely* built by the author; they can also be constructed around fictional characters, as is the case with for example the London of Sherlock Holmes. Michael T. Saler. *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 29.

[3] In the field of media studies, the term 'text' is used to refer to the content of media; hence a 'media text' is a particular film, book, television series, etc.

[4] See e.g. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, "Introduction: Why Study Fans?", in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, eds. Idem (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 1-16; Dan Hassler-Forest, *Transmedia: Verhalen Vertellen in het Digitale Tijdperk*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 14.

[5] Saler, *As If*, 17-18, 28.

consumers, and cultural studies and religious studies scholars have examined how media messages are received, understood and potentially used in different spheres of social and cultural life. In this context, fictional worlds have often been praised as safe playgrounds to confront and explore other perspectives and possibilities. They can provide us with raw material and symbolic resources that we use to create narratives about and reflect on how the world is, could be, or is not and should be, which holds potential for personal and social change.[6] In the field of fan studies, scholars have argued how fans in particular, with their active and intense participation in media texts, can elaborate fictional worlds in ways that provide alternative visions of the world in which we life.[7]

Meaning-making, as an intersubjective way of interpreting what is around us, is crucial to our shared social reality. Cultural meanings and our ideas and feelings about them shape how we view the world and guide how we behave in our everyday lives.[8] Current research on media reception therefore strongly emphasises what media texts and fan practices mean to individual people and society in general. Online platforms form an increasingly important database for this because forum posts, blog entries, and other forms of online content give researchers direct access to how people interpret the fictional works they encounter. However, as important as this is, online platforms are more than just a database. Firstly, being environments with build-in interface features and technological affordances, online platforms come with specific structures and implications that guide user actions and communication.[9] Secondly, as cultural places in their own right, online platforms have can become symbolic resources in and of themselves.[10] After all, individuals both produce *and* interpret online content from behind their screens, making sense of it in relation to their own lived reality—i.e., the reality or world of their everyday practices and lived experiences.[11] Indeed, studies have shown that online realms have a complex and often 'messy' relationship with offline reality, not in the least because online activities begin with physical human beings in front of a screen.[12] Therefore, any analysis of online meaning-making practices needs to take into

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[6] See e.g. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds., *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Dan Hassler-Forest, *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics: Transmedia World-building Beyond Capitalism* (London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016); Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, (London/New York: Routledge, 2006); Christopher Partridge, "Popular Occulture: Literature and Film," in *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Volume 1. Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 119-142; S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World* (London: Wallflower, 2008); Saler, *As If*; Johanna Sumiala, *Media and Ritual: Death, Community and Everyday Life* (Londen/New York: Routledge, 2013); Jolyon Baraka Thomas, *Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime and Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012).
[7] E.g. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Louisa Stein, *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 175-176.
[8] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5, 89; 1973; Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE, 1997), 1-4.
[9] See e.g. Joseph B Walther, "Theories of Computer-Mediated Communication and Interpersonal Relations," in *The Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*, ed. Mark L. Knapp and John A. Daly (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2011), 443-479.
[10] See e.g. Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: SAGE, 2000), 9; Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce and T.L. Taylor, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
[11] As I use the term, lived reality involves the world as people encounter, understand and interpret it within the context of their everyday practices and lived experiences. To say that people make sense of online content in relation to their lived reality, then, is to say that people make sense of online (or virtual) reality in relation to their broader understandings of the world, as shaped by their everyday practices and lived experiences.
[12] For studies on the relationship between screens and embodied experience, see e.g. (the classic) Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: New American Library, 1964); Byron Reeves

consideration the mindful body and its sensory experiences and the social, cultural and historical contexts of a platform's users.

In an attempt to do just that, this thesis is about the ways in which media fans—people who deeply love specific media texts or media culture in general[13]—negotiate the complex interrelations between virtual and non-virtual realities and it explores how this negotiation shapes their engagement with the fictional worlds presented in their favourite media texts. Specifically, this study focuses on one particular social media platform in order to analyse how material specificities of online platforms and everyday life contexts of users shape the ways in which fans make sense of what they produce and encounter online. In other words, this study attempts to answer the question:

How do the material structures of blogging platform Tumblr and the everyday contexts from which media fans use Tumblr shape the ways in which these fans make meaning from fandom and, by extension, the fictional media texts that are the objects of fandom?

This main question is divided into three subquestions:

- *What are Tumblr's material structures, and how do they shape fan practice on Tumblr and media fans' use of Tumblr in everyday life?*
- *How do media fans describe and experience Tumblr, and in what ways do their descriptions reveal Tumblr to be a liminal or liminoid sphere?*
- *What is the role of framings in how media fans come to understand and experience Tumblr from everyday contexts, and what kind of perceptions of fandom and fiction result from these understandings?*

In answering these questions, this study aims to contribute to our understanding of how and where fandom and fictional worlds become meaningful to people in their everyday lives and specifically attempts to deepen our knowledge of the place of social media in this process. This will offer further insight into the role of social media platforms as places of cultural significance, which is essential in a society where cultural practices are increasingly carried out in relation to, via and through online media.

1.1.1 CASE STUDY: TUMBLR

The case study used in this research project is the microblogging platform Tumblr, a social networking site that has proven to be an excellent fit for contemporary fan culture. The expansion of fandom to the so-called 'blogosphere' occurred during the early 2000s. Weblogs, as hypertextual online journals, made it easy to go from one page to another and increased the interpersonal interaction between fans.[14]

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and Clifford Nass, *The Media Equation: How People Treat Computers, Television, and New Media Like Real People and Places* (Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Jojada Verrips, "'Haptic Screens' and Our 'Corporeal Eye'," *Etnofoor* 15 (2002): 21-46; Sudeep Dasgupta, "On Screen: Electronic Media and the Embodied Subject," *Etnofoor* 15 (2002): 121-130. Work that specifically zooms in on the relationship between the on- and offline is e.g. Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Celia Pearce, *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009); T.L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

[13] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 3-4. Thus, this study does not include fandoms of for example music, celebrities, or sports.

[14] Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson, "Introduction: Work in progress," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the*

Since its inception in 2007 in New York (being purchased by Yahoo! in May 2013)[15], Tumblr has taken full advantage of the features of weblogs. All blogs created via *Tumblr.com* are interconnected through Tumblr's own network, and as a microblogging platform Tumblr promotes posting short and frequent blog entries (in contrast to standard blogging platforms, like WordPress). Over the past years, the site has seen an immense growth: it now hosts 420.6 million weblogs that together account for the creation of 29.5 million blog posts per day. Tumblr is especially popular among 18 to 29-year olds and is available in 18 languages, although the commonly used language between users is English and 42 per cent of the traffic comes from the United States.[16] The site furthermore describes itself as 'a global platform for creativity and self-expression' and a place 'where your interests connect you with your people.'[17] This has resulted in a broad variety of topics on the platform.

In the course of the past years, fans steadily gravitated towards Tumblr from forums and platforms like LiveJournal. Having been active in various fandoms since I was twelve years old (*Harry Potter* and Japanese animation and comics—known as anime and manga—forming a permanent part of my list), I too moved to Tumblr back in 2011. Although my initial interest was not in its fan culture and I have been more of a lurker than an active poster for the last few years, seeing up close the kind of activities that take place spiked my interest into the role of Tumblr in how fictional worlds become meaningful or otherwise present in people's daily lives. But until 2015, research on Tumblr was sparse. The few studies that were conducted have associated the specific fan culture that developed on Tumblr with (visual) transformative work, the performance of 'feels', and activism dubbed 'social justice'.[18] In other words, thus far, research on Tumblr has largely focused on practices *on* the platform, viewed from and placed within a broader context of social networking, transmedia and participatory culture. As important as this is, I could not help but notice that the immersion generated by modern technology easily makes us forget that people do not only do things with their objects of fandom *on* Tumblr, Tumblr itself is also an 'object' that people 'do things with'—stealing a glance on their phone while in class or settling themselves on the couch with their laptop on a Friday evening. I thought about the variety of practices on the platform and considered my own engagement in Tumblr fan culture, wondering: were the things I produced and encountered online in any way meaningful to me, in my daily life?

1.2 A LIVED 'RELIGION' PERSPECTIVE

Questions about the relationship between online fan practice and the role of fandom in people's everyday life point toward a complex dynamic between the fictional worlds of media text, the virtual reality of online fan culture, and the lived reality of people's day-to-day life. At the core of this dynamic lies people's innate ability to engage sometimes almost simultaneously in various worlds or realities—we temporarily leave our everyday life behind to enter the 'other' world that is the universe of a work of fiction or the

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Age of the Internet: New Essays, eds. Idem (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 14.

[15] Chris Isidore, "Yahoo buys Tumblr, promises to not 'screw it up'," published May 20, 2013, accessed May 6, 2018, https://money.cnn.com/2013/05/20/technology/yahoo-buys-tumblr/index.html.

[16] "Press Information," Tumblr, accessed June 18, 2018, https://www.tumblr.com/press.

[17] "Community Guidelines," Tumblr, accessed September 1, 2017, https://www.tumblr.com/policy/en/community; "About," Tumblr, accessed June 18, 2018, https://www.tumblr.com/about.

[18] Serena Hillman, Jason Procyk and Carman Neustaedter, "'alksjdf;lksfd': Tumblr and the Fandom User Experience," *DIS '14: Proceedings of the 2014 conference on Designing Interactive Systems* (2014); Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 154-158.

programmed environment of an online platform. As such, questions concerning how and where fictional worlds become meaningful to people in the age of digital media call for an approach that includes the study of people's ability to navigate between different realities. It is in this regard that the field of religious studies may have something to offer. Pointing to the constructed nature of many religions and the ways in which they are able to create and authenticate other ('sacred') realities aside from our own mundane one, various religious studies scholars have drawn parallels between religion and media.[19] I will elaborate on this development in section 2.2.1, but I think it is important to clarify right from the start how my background in religious studies—specifically the study of so-called 'lived religion'—shaped the approach of this study.

The lived religion approach concerns a branch of research that studies by means of ethnographically grounded research how religion is practised. Rather than being concerned with macro-level questions about what religion 'is', contemporary studies of lived religion look at the ways in which religion is shaped through actual people's daily practice and habits. This often involves a focus on people's own experiences and embodied practices as they themselves describe, understand and use them within specific contexts. In this context, the tension between religion and non-religious factors in in people's life (particularly in the 'secularised' West) has been an important issue to many lived religion studies. This has resulted (among other things) in discussions about how researchers should deal with the 'enchanted' reality of religious practitioners—a reality that does not align with 'common sense' understandings of the world and thus reveals two realities that not just researchers, but also practitioners themselves have to negotiate.[20]

The way in which lived religion (as a conceptual stance) emphasises the ultimately *lived* nature of religion, reminded me of the debate on online activities and their relationship to people's lived reality. Although the content that circulates within online fan cultures is not strictly comparable to a 'prescribed' kind of fandom or fannish doctrine, the discussion about how people actually practice and experience fandom from behind their screens in everyday life settings does show some parallels to the lived religion stance. Both religion and media engagement involve entering another type of world or reality (in which one reality is in some contexts commonly accepted as more 'real' than the other), and both involve some form of imaginative creation as the worlds we step into come to life through our own interaction with the text. Moreover, earlier studies have shown that claiming to be a fan (comparable to claiming to be religious) is seldom a neutral expression—in some contexts, fan status may be devalued or looked down upon.[21] People may read the Bible and encounter interpretations of the Bible in church, in the media, or in conversation with others. But even though this is all part of their religious practice, it is rarely the whole story of how their religious experience and practice takes shape and how religion becomes meaningful to them. Similarly, fans may read the source text (that perhaps not entirely coincidentally is referred to as the 'canon'), encounter interpretations of the text on Tumblr, in other media outlets, or in conversation with others. *But this is rarely the whole story of how their fannish experience and practice takes shape and how fandom becomes meaningful to them.*

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[19] This line of thinking can be found in the work of several religious studies scholars that work on popular culture, like in the work of S. Brent Plate (e.g. Plate, *Religion and Film*, 2008). He emphasises the constructed nature of religion and draws parallels between how religion creates worlds and how media does. I return to this idea in chapter 2, albeit from the perspective of another religious studies scholar: Rachel Wagner.

[20] Kim Knibbe and Helena Kupari, "Theorizing Lived Religion," forthcoming.

[21] See e.g. Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1-21.

Because of these parallels, it is at least worth exploring if theories used in the study of lived religion can also be of use to the study of how people relate fictional worlds to everyday life through fandom. Ethnographically grounded research is important in that regard, and a theoretical influence that may be particularly useful to consider is that of ritual studies. Contemporary ritual theories are increasingly concerned with the notion of 'framing', something anthropologists Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern refer to as 'all contextual delimitations and forms of the direction of attention.'[22] Framings communicate what kind of reality we are dealing with and can, as in the case of ritual, set something apart as special or powerful. This opens up a space of possibility and potentiality where things become possible that in any other frame would not be.[23] This notion clearly shows parallels to how scholars have described worlds of fiction as playgrounds to confront and explore alternative perspectives on the world. Therefore, exploring in what ways ritual theory can be of value to the study of (online) fandom is another aim of this thesis.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

Tumblr, like so many other online platforms, can be approached as a place that allows for rich and sustained interactions that have the ability to constitute cultures in their own right.[24] At the same time, the platform forms a material object that presents a highly visual environment with user-generated content that (re)produces its own cultural meanings, which is looked upon, used and interpreted by physical individuals in the context of their everyday lives. This means that there exists a visual culture on Tumblr where:

- users produce content (mostly images accompanied by text) that circulates on the platform;
- where the content, the digital environment and the technologies on which they are shown have their own physical or material properties;
- and where audiences view the content in particular ways from particular contexts.

This view of Tumblr as visual culture (inspired by cultural geographer Gillian Rose's understanding of visual culture[25]) was the starting point from which I developed the methodology for this study. It emphasises in particular the latter part of the list above: the digital environment and technologies and their physical and material properties and audience reception.

1.3.1 DATA COLLECTION: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

In order to study Tumblr fandom as a cultural phenomenon, I relied on ethnographic methods.[26] The core method I used was participant observation; the handbook on ethnography in virtual worlds by Tom

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[22] Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, *Ritual: Key Concepts in Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 123.

[23] Terhi Utriainen, "Ritually Framing Enchantment: Momentary Religion and Everyday Realities," *Suomen Antropologi* 41, no. 4 (2016): 54.

[24] Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*, 9.

[25] In her handbook on visual methodologies, Gillian Rose describes how the 'meanings of an image are made' at four sites: the site(s) of production of an image, the site of the image itself, the site(s) of its circulation, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences. Each site also has different aspects that Rose calls 'modalities': a technological one (which involves e.g. how an image is made or displayed), a compositional one (which involves e.g. an image's genre or how it has changed because of circulation), and a social one (which involves the range of economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image). Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (London: SAGE, 2016), 24-26.

[26] Proper ethnographic research takes months. Time did not allow me to spend that much time in the field,

Boellstorff et al. served as a guideline.[27] Participant observation stands for entering a fieldsite in order to step into the cultural context in which human activities take place, being immersed in local activity and taking extensive fieldnotes. According to Boellstorff et al., participant observation online largely follows the ground rules of its offline counterpart. Although I sat in front of my own computer, I could enter Tumblr and observe and participate in the practices of its users, inhabiting the platform as a space. In this context, where you do not actually leave your own workspace or home, it became particularly important to routinely spend several continuous hours on the platform for purposes of immersion. In addition, it was important that the moments and duration of my field visits reflected the patterns of the participants.

In order to conduct participant observation on Tumblr, I created my own Tumblr account to operate from. I turned the weblog that came with the account into a research blog with information about the research project, information about my use of the account, and all necessary information about participation, confidentiality and participant rights (see www.researchingfandom.tumblr.com). The weblog was used to observe and participate from and allowed me to easily approach users and keep anyone interested in the project up to date. The username (*researchingfandom*) was chosen because it immediately showed others my role as a researcher on the platform.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Tumblr largely functions as a public space where it is not always necessary (and often not possible) to obtain informed consent of every individual. Even so, I found it unethical to become a lurking researcher who observes people's weblog (often perceived as a personal space despite its public nature) without their informed consent. Therefore, I set out to approach users over Tumblr and ask them if they were interested in participating in the project.

I used several criteria to guide my search for participants. First, I decided to focus on multifandom blogs: blogs on which users post about the whole variety of media texts they enjoy, participating (albeit to different extents) in various fandoms at once. Multifandom blogs are common on Tumblr. As fan scholars Henry Jenkins and Matt Hills have pointed out, fandom is not an exclusive relationship because multiple texts can be deeply meaningful to fans.[28] Moreover, studying the entirety of people's practices and experiences on Tumblr (rather than cutting off specific practices in order to single out people's engagement in one single fandom) allowed me to remain closer to their wider consumption patterns.[29] Because of my focus on multifandom blogs, the search logically excluded weblogs that concerned only one specific fandom or media text. Second, a weblog had to explicitly refer on one of its pages to fandom (statements about being 'multifandom' or 'trash'), fan activity (e.g. fan fiction or fan art) or fan behaviour (references to 'fangirling' or 'being obsessed'). In other words, the users had to be self-

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however I was already familiar with the platform and observed and analysed aspects of it before. Therefore, six weeks was deemed to be sufficient for this particular study.

[27] Boellstorff et al, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*. Although Boellstorff et al. use a narrow definition of virtual worlds (restricting it to object-rich, often multi-user places that users can travel in and interact with and that continue to exist and change when a user logs off—such as the worlds of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games), their handbook contains valuable insights about doing research in virtual spaces, e.g. with regard to ethics.

[28] Henry Jenkins, "Excerpts from 'Matt Hill interviews Henry Jenkins'," in *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 18.

[29] Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 2.

proclaimed fans. Third, the weblogs had to be active: their owners had to have posted entries and/or visited their dashboard on a regular basis during the last three months and were still doing so. Fourth, the weblogs of participants had to be representative of the variety of media fandom weblogs within Tumblr fan culture (see also section 4.1). Lastly, participants had to be 18 years or older. This criterion turned out to be more difficult to uphold than I had anticipated: users do not always provide much personal information on their weblogs. When I asked my participants to fill in a short questionnaire a few weeks into the fieldwork, it turned out that one of my participants was 16 at the time of the research. All other participants were between 18 and 27 years old, most of them in their early twenties.

In the end, I obtained the informed consent of 20 users. A short questionnaire (designed via Google Forms) showed that 75 per cent of the participants identified as female, one person as male, one as transgender male, and three as non-binary or no specific gender. The global reach of Tumblr was reflected in the countries of residence of my participants: five lived in the United States, three in the United Kingdom, six in the Netherlands (a relatively high number, because I deliberately searched for Dutch people in order to be able to interview people face-to-face), one in Portugal, one in Switzerland, one in Australia, one in Canada, one in Israel, and one in the Philippines. With regard to their ethnicity, over half of the participants were white, four people described their ethnicity as Asian, one as Australian/Greek, one as bi-racial white/Hispanic, and two as Latino. The level of education of the participants was relatively high. Seventeen of them had received or were still following a form of higher education (the 16-year old participant being an obvious exception, as she was still in secondary school). Fourteen of the participants were still a student at college or university, the others were a postgraduate student, freelance illustrator, pharmacist, youth worker and administrative assistant.

I subscribed to the weblogs of the participants, observed their blog activities during March and the first two weeks of April 2017, and participated on Tumblr by (via the research blog) liking and reblogging their posts like any other user would.[30] I attempted to follow the activity pattern of my participants in order to be online simultaneously to them, but I did not always succeed due to the difference in time zones. Even so, my attempt resulted in many nights and weekends spent online while taking fieldnotes (often accompanied by screenshots) that I refined after each session. Participating in this way did not only allow me to observe the participants' activities and the content of their posts, but also forced me to navigate the platform like any other Tumblr user would, customising my own blog pages and dashboard options and making use of Tumblr's technological features, such as hashtags, the message system, side blogs, notifications, likes, drafts and the queue. Thus, I was able to (further) internalise and gather data on the material dynamics and organisation of Tumblr and how this informed the variety of practices on the platform.

1.3.2 DATA COLLECTION: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

I combined the participant observation with semi-structured, in-depth interviews. I interviewed all six Dutch participants, who together represented the variety of bloggers and weblogs present within Tumblr media fandom. Them being Dutch allowed me to conduct the interviews face to face and visit four of them at their homes. I deemed this important, because it enabled me to (better) grasp the different emotions underlying the interviewees' stories and see the actual places and circumstances in

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[30] The difference being that I reblogged content to a private side blog that is not accessible to anyone else. I did this in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

which they usually go on Tumblr. It also meant that the recollections presented to me during the interviews and the interviewees' overall meaning-making processes should be viewed against a Dutch background and the broader discourse on (social) media as it takes place in Dutch society. My interviewees were all white, five of them female and one transgender male, all of them in their early twenties. For a full typology of the interviewees and their background with regard to Tumblr and fandom, see appendix B.

While observations allowed me to detect less conscious aspects of fans' cultural practices, the interviews gave insight into the participants' own understandings of what they do and experience on Tumblr. In other words, the interviews enabled me to compare my observations of what people *do* on Tumblr with what they *say* about what they do. The choice to use semi-structured interviews meant that I prepared questions beforehand and did have topics in mind I wanted to discuss with interviewees, but I formulated the questions as open-ended as possible in order to allow my interviewees to speak freely about what they themselves considered to be important to talk about. Thus, I started each section of the interview with a question like: 'Could you describe Tumblr for me?', 'Could you tell me about your fandoms?', or 'Could you show to me what you do when you go on Tumblr?'. I then let the conversation develop from there, asking more specific questions from my interview scheme (see appendix C) only after interviewees had completed their initial answers. Different topics were discussed. I talked with the interviewees about their weblog(s), their fandoms and their use of Tumblr in daily life (e.g. in what circumstances and places they typically visit Tumblr). In addition, I looked back with them on their activities and experiences while being on Tumblr. I asked them to walk me through their dashboard and show me their usual activities, and let them explain to me the aspects they deemed relevant. I also asked them beforehand to choose three blog posts to discuss with me during the interview. Interviewees were free to choose their own posts, again in order to get insight into the themes that mattered to the interviewees' themselves, without my interference in their recollections.

The open form of interviewing was essential. Interviews inevitably take the form of storytelling: interviewees attempt (consciously or not) to create coherent narratives for the interviewer.[31] I hoped that by giving the interviewees the freedom to create their own narratives in their own home environment, I could both hear about and witness some of the framing techniques they might have developed over time to give Tumblr (and fandom in general) a place in their life. Even so, because an interview is a reflective medium that has to deal with a translation of experiences between interviewee and interviewer, an inevitable disadvantage was that some elements (particularly affective experiences) were quite hard for interviewees to put into words. Them visiting Tumblr during the interview helped to make the affective side of things more tangible, but it did not offer a complete solution for some things getting 'lost in translation'.

1.3.3 CODING AND ANALYSIS

For coding and analysis of the fieldwork data and interview transcriptions, I followed the grounded theory approach as described by Monique Hennink et al.[32] Characteristic of this approach is that it emphasises the interplay between deduction and induction: the core analytic tasks are inductive, but the approach also explicitly acknowledges the use of deductive strategies and theory in qualitative data analysis. That

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[31] Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, 20.
[32] Monique Hennink, Inge Hutter and Ajay Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods* (London: SAGE, 2011).

is, theory building should be grounded in and validated by empirical data, but it happens in dialogue with pre-existing theory and insights (in this study from literature on ritual, cultural meaning-making and fan practice). I followed the analytic cycle of Hennink et al. in that I moved from data transcription and preparation to coding, and from coding to description, comparison, categorisation, conceptualisation, and eventually theoretical application, extension and refinement. Each task was closely interlinked as I had to go back and forth between them. For coding, comparison and categorisation, I used the software programme ATLAS.ti. Deductive codes were used as a guide to become sensitive to certain issues. Inductive codes were developed based on reading the data and aided in the analysis of how my participants understood and experienced certain issues. Both helped me to locate relevant themes and patterns and organise the data for focused analysis.

1.4 HOW THIS THESIS IS STRUCTURED

This thesis is divided into six chapters: an introduction (1), a theoretical framework (2), three analytical chapters (3, 4 and 5) and a conclusion (6).

In chapter 2, I elaborate on the topics brought up in this introduction, combining insights from the fields of fan studies, media studies and ritual studies to draw a theoretical framework from which to analyse the data collected during the fieldwork and interviews.

Chapter 3 zooms in on the first subquestion: *what are Tumblr's material structures, and how do they shape fan practice on Tumblr and media fans' use of Tumblr in everyday life?* It first describes Tumblr's interface and affordances, approaching the platform both as programmed software that facilitates computer-mediated communication and as a material object that is accessible via different screens. The chapter specifically examines how Tumblr functions as a microblogging platform, what its technological features are, and how these features shape both media fans' practices *on* the platform and their use *of* the platform in daily life.

The second subquestion, *how do media fans describe and experience Tumblr, and in what ways do their descriptions reveal Tumblr to be a liminal or liminoid sphere?*, is central to chapter 4. The chapter begins with a description of Tumblr's cultural and social structures in order to paint a picture of the specific (media) fan culture that has developed on the platform. After that, I consider how people describe and experience the platform based on their own accounts. I show that, partly because of Tumblr's specific culture, people juxtapose Tumblr against everyday life, understanding Tumblr as a world or culture of its own. I examine these descriptions of otherworldliness up close to analyse how the understandings and experiences of my participants can be characterised and argue that it is possible to view Tumblr as a liminoid sphere (a concept derived from ritual scholar Victor Turner), free from normal rules and expectations. I then reconsider fan practices as a form of liminoid play, delving deeper into the notion of fictional worlds as symbolic resources and fan practice as meaning-making activity.

Whereas chapter 4 revolves around my participants' descriptions of Tumblr, the last analytic chapter takes a closer look at how their understandings of Tumblr come about and what results from them with regard to how fans view and experience fandom and the fictional media texts that are the objects of fandom. Specifically, chapter 5 explores the question: *what is the role of framings in how media fans come to understand and experience Tumblr from everyday contexts, and what kind of perceptions of fandom and fiction result from these understandings?* Framings, as contextual delimitations that guide

our experience, might be important in shaping people's understandings and experiences of Tumblr and what happens on Tumblr. Indeed, chapter 5 will show that media fans use framing techniques in an attempt to confine Tumblr to specific spheres of life and sensitively navigate between the fannish reality of Tumblr and the reality of their everyday lives depending on the context they find themselves in. This results in specific understandings and experiences of Tumblr, among which its otherworldliness. Moreover, I explore the possibility that it results in specific perceptions of *fandom* and the fictional media texts that are the object of fandom—perceptions that reveal themselves most clearly in moments of conflict, and that may seem contradictory but nevertheless exist in close relationship to one another.

In the concluding chapter, I recapitulate the answers to the three subquestions and relate the findings to each other in order to answer the main research question. Furthermore, I discuss the shortcomings of this study and its implications for future research on media fandom, online culture, and ritual.

CHAPTER 2 OTHER WORLDS AND MULTIPLE REALITIES: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON MEDIA, RITUAL AND PLAY

In order to analyse Tumblr as a cultural place where people do things with media texts and consider it as an 'object' in itself that people 'do things with' from everyday life contexts, I will make use of several theories from the field of fan studies, media studies and ritual studies. Specifically, this chapter builds a theoretical framework by reflecting on existing theories and insights surrounding contemporary media fan culture and people's engagement in different realities. It uses the insights of several ritual scholars to explore possible ways to make sense of this engagement in 'other worlds', building mainly on the work of religious studies scholar Rachel Wagner to show why it is possible to draw parallels between religious realities and experiences and virtual ones, and explain how ritual theory can help us to make sense of the processes at work.

2.1 MILLENNIAL FAN CULTURE AND DIGITAL WORLDS

Research on Tumblr, although it has been developing over the last few years, is still in its infancy. Computer scholars Serena Hillman, Jason Procyk and Carman Neustaedter were among the first to study what they call 'Tumblr fandom communities'. Although their focus was on user-centred design, they found 'a unique culture of practice' on the platform in which users felt they could be very much themselves, felt motivation and purpose for participating in a community, shared a variety of social experiences, and participated in online activism known as 'social justice'.[33] A year later, fan and media scholar Louisa Stein published her discursive study on millennial fan culture, referring to digital platforms as spaces that feature and make visible the 'emotionally driven collective authorship' that is key to said culture.[34] Tumblr played an important role in her research as one of these digital platforms, which makes sense considering the fact that Tumblr's user demographic exists overwhelmingly out of millennials (a contested term that, stripped-down of its discursive associations, is often used to refer to the generation of people born between roughly 1980 and 2000). This is why Stein's study is particularly useful to contextualise Tumblr practices within the broader media landscape of millennial fandom, contemporary transmedia and participatory culture.

In *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age* (2015), Stein analyses not only fan practices and spaces, but also considers the discourse produced by and through (English-languaged and American- or British based) actors, producers, media industries, and media texts themselves. In her analysis, Stein pays specific attention to how digital platforms and their affordances (discursively) shape millennial culture, fan culture, and their intersection.[35] The distinctions between millennial and fan culture are in Stein's view nuanced but important. She notes that both cultures have things in common

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[33] Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter, "Tumblr and the Fandom User Experience," 1.
[34] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 156-157.
[35] Ibid., 6.

but also have their own discursive history. Fandom has for example been associated with specific modes of media engagement that feature the use of digital techniques, community-evolved ethics and an often taboo 'fan' label that stands for obsessive behaviour and emotional excess.[36] Millennials, in turn, are considered to be digital-savvy and either use their technological know-how for social action and community-affirmation (which Stein calls the 'millennial hope' narrative), or contemporary digital culture has supposedly empowered them in ways that turned them into morally ambiguous young adults with active media engagement and no respect for institutions (a vision of millennials Stein dubs 'millennial noir').[37]

Of particular interest for our purposes are the ways in which Stein found millennials to relate to and participate in fan practices that traditionally are considered taboo. She argues that millennial and fan culture share their engagement in 'transformative work' and a 'culture of "feels"'—intersections that dissolve the distinction between millennial and fan culture and make fan practice more socially acceptable. As a result, a millennial fan culture has developed that transgresses binaries and erases hierarchical structures.[38] According to Stein, this process is strongly influenced by digital platforms and informs and encompasses millennial fans' everyday lives. What do these intersections involve and what does this mean for the media landscape that Tumblr is part of?

2.1.1 TRANSFORMATIVE WORK AND COLLECTIVE AUTHORSHIP

The most important intersection between millennial culture and fan culture is that they are both involved in transformative cultural work; i.e., millennials and fans both feel they have the right to transform the cultural resources they encounter and expect others to do so as well.[39] Stein defines 'transformative work' as work that uses already existing media but 'adds something new, with a further purpose or different character, altering the [source] with new expression, meaning, or message.'[40] In her definition, transformation is largely about the notion of 'remix': recombining or adding to existing cultural materials to form new interpretations and meanings or to create an alternative narrative focus or ideological priority.[41] As a result, millennial fans not only spread the meanings presented in commercial media, they just as much revise them through a process of deconstruction and rearrangement—a process that happens mostly in online spaces, for example via fan fiction, fan art, or fan videos.[42] Although people can engage in these practices simply for fun or out of love for the source

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[36] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 9. The notion of fandom being a taboo or niche phenomenon (i.e., something that takes place in the margins of culture and that is not commonly accepted but rather frowned upon) has a long tradition in fandom, the study of fandom, and society at large. See for example Henry Jenkins' seminal work *Textual Poachers*, which (successfully) attempted to re-evalue the cultural work of fans (1992), or Matt Hills' considerations on the contestedness of fan identity, particularly in academic circles, in *Fan Cultures* (2002).

[37] Ibid., 117.

[38] Ibid., 9.

[39] Ibid., 131.

[40] Idem. Stein points out that the notion of transformativity has for a long time been used by fans as a legally defensible position in terms of copyright laws. For example, important fan organisation like the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW, the organisation that also hosts the popular fan fiction website Archive of Our Own) strongly emphasise the centrality of transformation in fan culture.

[41] Ibid., 57.

[42] Ibid., 23, 65. As Stein notes, this is the 'basic method of poaching' as described by Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers*. Jenkins was the first to explain fan practices as tactics (in the sense of sociologist Michel de Certeau's (1984) everyday 'tactics', as opposed to structural, repressive strategies) that create the narratives fans themselves want to see. Through 'poaching' texts, fans craft a discursive place for themselves.

text, Stein points out that such selections and recombinations (albeit only valued when driven by love and respect for the source text[43]) can also result from dissatisfaction or critical engagement with a text, both in terms of pure fannish affect (e.g. because fans love or hate a character more) and in terms of ideological disagreements (e.g. because fans are unhappy with the values upheld by a narrative or aesthetic choice).[44] The latter in particular can result in fan activism that contributes to an alternative or transformed culture as imagined by the fans.[45] Critical or not, Stein ultimately describes the process of selection and remix as one of transformative authorship that creates new, fan-authored texts that expand the original source text. As a result, the notion of an authored text as a static, coherent, individual act of creativity is transformed; a text has become something that is fluid, ongoing and contradictory, full of potential, ever-changing meanings.[46]

In other words, through transformative work, fans create (or further expand) a transmedia sphere in which a story world and its layers of narrative meaning are spread out across different media. Essential to this process is that, rather than being about individual, internalized devotion, the creation of this transmedia sphere is done *collectively*. Stein points out that shared digital networks are crucial in contributing to this sense of collective ownership of a text.[47] She argues that how a platform shapes collective transformative work largely depends on the affordances and limitations of the interface as well as the norms and expectations that have developed within the digital community.[48] Stein explicitly mentions blogging platforms (such as Tumblr) as examples of digital networks that are particularly strong in performing collective transformative work, because blog posts invite participation through comments and hashtags that function as transformative layers that expand a text even further. Fan and communication scholar Paul Booth has for this reason argued that a blog post is always an in potential collective text that exists out of the original post (i.e. the post originally created by one person) as well as all its comments, the writer thus being a group rather than an individual.[49] Therefore, online spaces enable audiences to negotiate the media texts they encounter, not only through conversation with the texts themselves, but also through conversation with each other.[50]

2.1.2 A CULTURE OF 'FEELS'

Collective as the transformative practice may be, there is something that must drive people to participate in them in the first place. According to Booth and Stein, this 'something' is shared emotional investment.[51] It is in this context that Stein explicitly refers to Tumblr. She shows how blog posts on Tumblr ask for 'individual collective affirmation through re-blogging, which involves simply hitting the reblog button or adding tags or additional commentary to a post.'[52] Such reblogs can also take the form of reaffirmation of devotion or materialisation of a strongly held point of view when fans reblog the same thing more than once.[53] Stein argues that when the notifications (the number that shows how

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[43] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 131-132.
[44] Ibid., 66.
[45] Ibid., 176.
[46] Ibid., 133.
[47] Ibid., 150-153.
[48] Ibid., 74.
[49] Paul Booth, *Digital Fandom: New Media Studies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 43.
[50] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 73.
[51] Ibid., 156-157.
[52] Ibid., 154-156.
[53] Ibid., 156.

many times a post is liked or reblogged) on a post increase, it celebrates and makes visible a shared, collective passion. It is therefore a public celebration of intimate, yet no longer private emotion. This reveals a culture of emotional response—something millennial fans refer to as 'feels', hence the term 'feels culture'. According to Stein, performed feels fuel transformative creativity and build authorship communities.[54] This process is often strengthened by the use of abbreviations, made-up names and terms, fan-specific codes or languages, and particular uses of hashtags that help to define specific (sub)groups and facilitate a sense of community.[55]

An important reason why Tumblr is exemplary for the role that digital affordances can play in the development of a collectively shared culture of feels is that—apart from its typical blog features— Tumblr facilitates the use of visual images and GIFs that enable the depiction of embodied emotion. Tumblr's visual culture therefore enables Tumblr posts to not only make shared emotion tangible, but to also visually perform and embody collectively shared emotion, which has resulted in an aesthetic of intimate emotion and high performativity on the platform.[56] Stein describes for example how fans deliberately perform heightened emotions as they use and remix images, text and hashtags to make posts personal and emphasise their own engagement in a fandom.[57]

However, the emotionally driven culture of collective transformative authorship is neither total nor uncontested. Because excessive fan emotion and practice has for a long time resided in spheres of taboo, the expression of emotion is according to Stein still 'simultaneous threat and asset' to fans.[58] This asks for constant negotiation on their part, within as well as outside fan environments. Stein shows that the seemingly democratic collective of millennial fan culture is not uncontested within its own circles. She describes how discourses of collective celebration go hand in hand with 'an emphasis on professional skill and professional aesthetics.'[59] Many millennial fans for example prefer fanworks that follow professionalised aesthetic rules (such as correct grammar and punctuation in fan fiction) and share resources to help others develop a professionalised style or tone in their work. Stein furthermore found that, in line with broader discourse on artistic professionalism, such discourses often urge fan creators to downplay excess emotion in favour of 'individual literacy and restrain.'[60] In addition, she points out that there are many fans who urge others to protect the rights and values of individual creators and their skill, emphasising the importance of citing sources and asking for permission to spread or further transform others' work. This results in attempts to limit transformation and distribution, in the self-policing of authorship, and in conflict over as to what extent creators have the right to keep control over their own ideas and (transformative) creations.[61]

2.1.3 TRANSGRESSING BINARIES?

The outward direction of fannish energy and fandom's ongoing move from the margins to mainstream culture is in many ways driven by digital platforms like Tumblr and YouTube. According to Stein, these

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[54] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 156.
[55] Ibid., 62-63.
[56] Ibid., 158.
[57] Ibid., 145, 158.
[58] Ibid., 170.
[59] Ibid., 159.
[60] Idem.
[61] Ibid., 159-160.

highly publicised online spaces make fandom part of everyday life and slowly render acceptable previously tabooed fan behaviour within mainstream (media) culture. Even so, this does not mean that separate discourses, various value systems, and different social realities exist in perfect harmony—as the fact that collective authorship is contested even within fan communities already shows. Indeed, Stein writes that millennial fans have to constantly negotiate between realities as the digital world suffuses their everyday lives and interrelates with the personal, familial and national contexts they live in.

Although Stein acknowledges the dynamic between different realities, it is unfortunately one of the lesser developed parts of her argument. As she nears the end of her book, Stein paints a perhaps somewhat too idealised picture of an all-inclusive and expansive fan community that is driven by multiple texts and media, and that erases hierarchical structures and divides 'between young and old, real life and online, producer and consumer, fan and star, high culture and low culture.'[62] In Stein's view, millennial fandom celebrates both shared fannishness and 'shared transgression and its unbounded multiplicity.' Because of this, Stein believes that millennial fans have come to experience fandom no longer as an escape from everyday life, but as a powerful outlet 'that informs their lived experience (...).'[63] Fandom may still be an alternative reality whose values may be 'more humane and democratic than those held by mundane society' (as Henry Jenkins described it in *Textual Poachers*), millennial fandom now also directs this reality outward as it 'dissolve[s] the divide between fan communities and a nonfannish, mundane world.'[64] For Stein, this is most noticeable in the ways millennial fans have created a landscape in which different media continuously provide material that can be used to imagine or instigate an alternative or transformed culture. Her earlier remarks on the tensions that rise from the multiplicity and contradictions within millennial fan culture thus fade into the background in favour of a vision of a community that through the transgression of binaries—not in the least that between online and offline—achieves change in the world. We will keep this idea in mind as we venture into other theories on media consumption and will in later chapters compare this sense of 'real life transformation' with the experiences of this study's participants.

2.2 VIRTUAL WORLDS FROM A RITUAL STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

2.2.1 SOME DEFINITIONAL ISSUES: RELIGION AND POPULAR CULTURE

Media and fan studies scholars are not the only people that have showed interest in the study of fandom and popular culture. Over the past decades, religious studies scholars have increasingly directed their attention to the ways in which people make meaning from media. At first, research focused mainly on the use of religious themes and symbols in popular culture and the use of media within conventional religions (such as the use of television in evangelical Christianity). Later on, scholars began to explore the idea that popular culture can serve *as* religion or functions much *like* religion for many people.[65] The

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[62] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 173, 175.
[63] Ibid., 175.
[64] Ibid., 175-176.
[65] For an overview of different approaches to religion and popular culture, see Forbes and Mahan, *Religion and Popular Culture*. Their introductory chapters in particular provide a comprehensive summary of the variety of work in this field. For studies that examined possible parallels between religion and popular culture phenomena, see e.g. the work of Michael Jindra (1994) on Star Trek fandom, John Lyden (2003) on film, S. Brent Plate (2008) also

recent rise of self-proclaimed religions that are explicitly based on fiction, such as the Church of All Worlds (inspired by Robert Heinlein's novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961)) and Jediism (based on George Lucas's original *Star Wars* trilogy (1977-1983)), only provided fuel for the research on possible parallels between religion and popular culture.[66]

Someone who brought together many of the insights derived from previous research on the relationship between religion and popular culture is religious scholar Rachel Wagner. In *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality* (2012), Wagner presents a variety of parallels that can be drawn between (especially digital) media and religion. She is particularly interested in the similarities between religious experience and the experiences and modes of beings offered by virtual reality, which she defines as 'any form of digital technology that involves user engagement with software via a screen interface.'[67] In order to study this, she relies strongly on concepts from the field of ritual studies, which is why her insights provide an exciting starting point to consider the virtual world(s) of Tumblr media fan culture. However, I should make clear that my interest in the parallels between virtual experiences and 'religious' ones (and hence Wagner's theories on the subject) serves a slightly different purpose than Wagner's own. Wagner's starting point is to draw analogies between virtual experiences and practices and her (rather vague) description of religion[68], the argument being that our 'seemingly secular culture' is 'more "religious" than we might first realize.'[69] Her primary question is subsequently about the ways in which virtual experiences are akin to those traditionally labelled 'religious', and what we can learn by drawing such comparisons.

Although I agree with Wagner that we might learn something by drawing comparisons between virtual experiences and religious (specifically ritual) ones, the purpose of this thesis is *not* to make statements about if people's activities and experiences are 'religious' or not, our culture consequently being 'more "religious"' than we realise. As many scholars have argued, using the term 'religion' may just as easily obscure our understanding of a phenomenon as clarify it.[70] In this particular case, Wagner's largely functionalist descriptions of religion may overlook important differences between virtual reality and religion, and the similarities she finds may extend to any other phenomenon that concerns a type of

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on film, Christopher Partridge (2004) on popular music and more, Stewart Hoover (2006) on television, and Jolyon Baraka Thomas (2012) on Japanese animation and comics and its fan culture.

[66] For academic work on these so-called 'fiction-based religions' (also referred to as 'hyper-real religions' or 'invented religions'), see e.g. Adam Possamai, ed., *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); or Davidsen, "Fiction-based Religion."

[67] Wagner, *Godwired*, 1.

[68] The only time Wagner uses an explicit definition of religion that she elaborates on is in chapter 9 of *Godwired*, when she uses Clifford Geertz's definition of religion as a cultural system (1973) to draw parallels between religion and transmedia. In the introductory chapter, Wagner relies more on broad descriptions. She refers to religion as a 'manifestation of the desire for transcendence, the wish for some mode of imagination or being that lies just beyond the reach of our ordinary lives.' (4) But religion is for Wagner also about world-building: 'the imagining of a world in which we are in control, in which things make sense, in which what we do has profound meaning, and in which we can enact our ideal selves.' (2) In other words (or perhaps also), it is about 'finding meaning, order and a sense of predictability', about 'imagining the way the world might be', about 'stories that animate our lives, rituals that shape our consciousness, and modes of interacting that define who we are' (14).

[69] Ibid., 9.

[70] For an excellent article on the problematic nature of the use 'religion'-definitions (substantive as well as functionalist) to make sense of popular culture, see Gordon Lynch, "What is this 'religion' in the study of religion and popular culture?", in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. idem (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 125-142.

world-building. Moreover, the concept 'religion' knows a discursive history rooted in Western Enlightenment and imperialism, making any assumption about 'religion' being something that consists of universal elements that can be defined and used as analytical categories problematic.[71] Therefore, this thesis' aim is to gain a better understanding of experiences and activities in virtual reality and their relationship to other social realities, but in their own regard (i.e., without labelling them as religious or non-religious).

Despite this difference, Wagner's undertaking is not useless to us—to the contrary. As Wagner rightfully points out, research on video games and transmedia (and, I would add, media fandom and fiction in general) has focused on many topics that have also been central to the study of religious experiences and practices, such as our relationships towards other realms and modes of being, identity- and community building, questions of structure and meaning-making, performance, and storytelling. This means that theories from the field of religious studies (specifically ritual theory) may provide us with tools to better understand media-related processes and vice versa.[72] Therefore, apart from the definitional issues surrounding the concept of 'religion', Wagner's work provides an excellent starting point to explore this possibility.

2.2.2 (TRANS)MEDIA, WORLD-BUILDING AND THE MAGIC CIRCLE

As noted earlier, Louisa Stein argues that digital platforms play an important role in the transgression of binaries, as they make millennial fan practice increasingly part of everyday life rather than something apart from it. Wagner delves further into the relationship between on- and offline realms, showing along the way that how we approach the things we do in online realms affects the meanings we attribute to it and may result in conflict. She points out that the boundaries between realms or modes of being (also known as 'frames') can be thought of as creating conceptual 'worlds'. Physical features are often important in this, as they can clearly frame a space and guide our experience in it. Wagner mentions for example architecture, but she also explains how computer screens define space with a window 'into which we peer' and guide our immersion via neural links and processes such as logging in, clicking procedures, picking up a controller, or the materialization of an avatar. In Wagner's words, this 'ritual preparation' creates a frame that allows us to experience an entry into another, virtual world, which in turn may contain multiple worlds that we can step into, such as the worlds provided by films, video games, MMORPGs or book (e.g. the world of *Harry Potter* or the *Halo* universe).[73]

Wagner shows that transmedia worlds in particular are capable of inviting habitation in other worlds, as they offer multiple streams of engagement with—and thus entry ports to—the worlds they evoke. For example, Harry Potter exists of the original book series, but its universe also includes spin-off books, a film series, a spin-off film series, an interactive website, a theatre play, a theme park, and an active fan culture (including for example the music genre of Wizard Rock, productions like *A Very Potter Musical*, and many online fan forums). All these individual media streams point beyond themselves to

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[71] See for instance the work of Talal Asad and Russell McCutcheon, two prominent post-structuralists that have voiced such critiques. Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27-54; Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[72] Wagner, *Godwired*, 10.

[73] Ibid., 79, 82-83, 153.

one other 'world'. Fans can use any of these ports of entry to step into the story world, and they have to consume the variety of all streams to learn all there is to know about the world.[74] It is for this reason, Wagner notes, that fan scholar Henry Jenkins argued that storytelling has become more and more 'the art of world-building', as every story has become 'bigger than the film, bigger even than the franchise— since fan speculations and elaborations also expand the world in a variety of directions.'[75] Thus, as Stein also showed, fans co-create and further expand the transmedia sphere or world build by the original source texts.

One way to explain the relationship between virtual and transmediated worlds and 'real life'[76] is via the notion of the magic circle. In the first half of the twentieth century, cultural historian Johan Huizinga introduced the magic circle in his book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (originally published in Dutch, 1938). Ever since, game theorists have used the concept to demarcate worlds of play from everyday reality.[77] According to Huizinga, the construction of a magic circle involves the construction of a boundary or a process of marking off. To step into a magic circle is therefore 'a stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own.'[78] This disposition is constituted by special rules that indicate a time and space—a temporary world—that is set apart from daily life and dedicated to 'the performance of an act apart.'[79] Wagner writes that world-building can be understood as the construction of a magic circle as it 'draw[s] us into another "space", inviting us to see it as a world different from our own, at least temporarily.'[80] She sees magic circles furthermore as nurturing in their 'predictability and otherworldliness', explaining that structured transmedia worlds offer us a means of escape and mode of imagining that help to still our 'hunger' for a sense of meaning, order and definition in our real lives.[81] The magic circle in this regard becomes a welcome social contract (which includes cultural conventions) that has an authority we choose to submit ourselves to. Wagner describes this as a 'lusory attitude' (a concept coined by philosopher Bernard Suits) or an 'act of faith': the commitment to adhere to the (implicit) rules, expectations and attitudes of the magic circle and perceive them as (temporarily) real or the only ones that matter.[82]

Naturally, fictional transmedia worlds are not the only acts of world-building present in modern society. Wagner draws the parallel that transmediated engagement with other worlds is in fact much like the ritual engagement with another (supernatural) reality as we know it from conventional religions. Religious worlds are 'transmediated' in the sense that they, too, offer multiple streams of engagement with another world through for instance sacred writings, myths, ritual performances, liturgy, paintings, and music.[83] Indeed, many ritual theorists use the metaphor of 'worlds' to make sense of the ritual engagement with other realities, describing ritual primarily as a performed process of boundary marking

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[74] Wagner, *Godwired*, 207, 232.

[75] Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 114.

[76] In order to refer to the offline world, I use the terms 'real life', 'the real/non-virtual world', and 'non-virtual reality'. Realities specifically tied to individual people's lived reality are referred to as 'everyday reality' and 'everyday/daily life'. These terms best reflect how Tumblr users themselves refer to the offline (e.g. when they speak of meeting someone 'in real life' or talk about something being part of their 'daily life').

[77] Wagner, *Godwired*, 86.

[78] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970 [1949]), 8.

[79] Ibid., 10.

[80] Wagner, *Godwired*, 209.

[81] Ibid., 207-209.

[82] Ibid., 74-75.

[83] Ibid., 83.

or 'framing' that sets something apart and marks it as different, valuable, powerful or special.[84] Huizinga, too, relates the magic circles to ritual as well as games. He argues that both ritual and games have the ability to transport participants to 'another world' that is inscribed within the magic circle.[85] For Wagner, this means that they can create a feeling of belonging, their sense of order giving us the strength to deal with hardships in life.[86] Rituals, transmedia stories and games thus seem very much alike in their ability to build worlds, draw up magic circles, and have potential meaning to us in our daily lives.

THE 'RITUAL-GAME-STORY THING'

The world-building capacity of ritual, media and games encouraged Wagner to further explore their relationship. She arrived at what she calls the 'ritual-game-story thing': a 'complex blend of different types of interactivity, a kind of demarcation of sacred space and time that has been going on throughout human history, but which is also at the heart of popular culture today.'[87] The concept of the ritual-game-story thing is based on the idea that, as they construct another world inscribed within a magic circle, rituals, games, and stories (and, by extension, transmedia worlds and any other kind of virtual world) share several important characteristics and functions in terms of how we encounter them and how they may shape us when we engage in them. That is, rather than generating separate types of experience, Wagner argues that rituals, games and stories all involve 'overlapping forms of human meaning-making, differentiated primarily by the intensions of the player-performer.'[88]

According to Wagner, rituals, games and stories share five features that are helpful to unravel the relationship between the three. In brief, they all have to do with narrative and interactivity via a 'performance of directed activities.'[89] That is, ritual, games and stories all have a rich but complex relationship with **a)** *narrative*: a story arc that provides a specific structure of experience and shapes our expectations of or approach to the ritual-game-story thing in question. Narratives furthermore have the ability to draw people in emotionally or trigger emotional experiences, particularly when we feel a strong connection to the characters we follow/perform or feel helpless in relation to (narrative) fate.[90] This story arc often includes oppositions or other kinds of **b)** *conflict* that are organised or put in place via the ritual-game-story thing. The narrative does not exist by itself, however: we always **c)** *interact* with it, i.e. we have to act in relation to it; we need to *perform*, to do something.[91] Every interaction is in turn shaped by **d)** *rules* that not only structure and restrict our interaction, but also leave openings and a certain level of freedom that allows us to **e)** *play* with or in response to the multiple possibilities created from the system. Rules are in that regard the 'standard against which we veer when we "play" with the steering wheel,' while play is 'experimentation and innovation in response to a rigid system or

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[84] See e.g. Stewart and Strathern, *Ritual*, 123-129; Terhi Utriainen, "Lived Religion through the Dynamics of Ritual Framing," forthcoming.
[85] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 18.
[86] Wagner, *Godwired*, 3.
[87] Ibid., 10.
[88] Ibid., 11.
[89] Ibid., 55.
[90] Wagner explains this through the concept of catharsis. Ibid., 47-49.
[91] Wagner notes in this regard the controversy surrounding the term interactivity; she opts to go with the basic definition of 'acting in relation to something' while emphasising the importance of performance. Ibid., 5-6.

structure.'[92] Together, Wagner argues, they determine how much we (are allowed to) interact with the narrative or how much freedom we have within the reality of a specific world.

For example, a *story* exists as a fixed narrative involving some kind of conflict that is drawn up by its author. But without readers, a story is just words. Readers interact with the narrative as they bring their own experiences and personal backgrounds to the text, opening up a myriad of interpretations as texts mirror many of our assumptions back to us.[93] Stories also necessarily exhibit gaps that we consciously and unconsciously fill in as readers. In this regard, readers play with the narrative structure provided to them, and they do so while following the logics or rules of both the narrative and real world (e.g., unless the narrative tells us otherwise, we instantly assume that grass is green when we read about grass, or take it that rules of gravity also apply in the story world; we immediately fill this 'gap' based on the rules of our own world).[94] Interestingly, Wagner explicitly mentions fan fiction as a form of interpretative play, because fans appropriate received texts to reread them in ways that serve their own interests (for example by writing an alternative ending or changing a character's love interest).[95]

Games (note that Wagner mostly refers to *video games* when she talks about games) also involve narrative, conflict, interactivity, rules, and play, albeit in a different combination. According to Wagner, games consist of programmed software that provides a specific scripted performance that tells a narrative, guides our experience and can make arguments (especially surrounding oppositions) through its script—something game scholar Ian Bogost calls 'procedural rhetoric', a 'learning by doing'.[96] Games, more so than stories, contain this element of performance. Games also, perhaps more so than stories and rituals, invite players to explore the world of the game and make their own choices in it, resulting in high levels of play. Even so, gameplay still occurs within the limits set by the game's system and its rule-based representations, put there by the programmers. Wagner points out that almost anything we do on digital screens has been 'in some way, scripted, limited, programmed, coded', because the virtual cannot not exist without programmers who define its bounds.[97]

The dynamic of scripted performance has also been central to many *ritual* theories. Wagner argues that software scripts provide us with a same sort of 'liturgical order' as ritual scripts do, both scripts having the ability to shape us as we perform them.[98] Wagner's conceptualisation of ritual fits contemporary discussions about ritual that centre around questions of framing: a type of (experientially) structured process that—with regard to ritual—defines, indicates or suggests that something special is going on.[99] She refers for example to Catherine Bell, who argues that ritual is interactive in that 'the body interacts with a structured environment.'[100] The degree of ritualisation in an action is by Bell seen as a strategy

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[92] Wagner, *Godwired*, 64, 32. Wagner borrows her definition of play from game scholars Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman.
[93] Ibid., 44.
[94] Ibid., 49. Wagner refers to video game scholar Jesper Juul in this regard, but similar ideas also have a long tradition in the field of literary studies, particularly in reader-response criticism (see e.g. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978)).
[95] Ibid., 45-46.
[96] Ibid., 58.
[97] Ibid., 7.
[98] See also the work of Roy Rappaport on the communicative role of the liturgical order in ritual. Roy A. Rappaport, "The Obvious Aspects of Ritual," in *Ecology, Meaning and Religion* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1979), 173-221.
[99] Utriainen, "Lived Religion," forthcoming.
[100] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 107.

of power, because through specifically structured actions, the thing that is being done becomes distinguished and privileged from other (more mundane) activities.[101] This is also why rituals can be so powerful in bringing about social values and order.[102]

Ritual scholar Jonathan Z. Smith noticed a similar process when he considered how ritual creates 'sacred space' that acts as a kind of 'focusing lens' (by others also referred to as 'frame') that structures an experience in a way that sets a thing or action apart and marks it as significant, turning it into something of value and embedding it with the power to make a difference.[103] Wagner mentions him because Smith emphasised that ritual liturgy not only involves a structured process, it also invites individual variation and performance to enact meaning, for example to relate the ritual performance to one's personal needs. In other words, as with stories and games, rituals and ritual objects are mere props until people perform them.[104] Smith explains this individual freedom as 'playing' with a ritual, writing that the participants can do things with variables of life within the controlled environment of the ritual, and that the rules of ritual exist specifically to be negotiated, 'existing as an ideal sense of order alongside the chaos of real life.' Because of this, ritual is for Smith 'a means of performing the way things ought to be', since ritual 'relies for its power on the perceived fact that, in actuality, such possibilities cannot be realized' and 'gains force where incongruency is perceived and thought about.'[105] Thus, the way in which ritual participants perform the ritual (i.e., interact with the ritual structure) is restricted by rules while leaving room for play, shaping the way in which participants encounter or imagine things, actions and the world around them.

As we look at the overlapping features of stories, games and rituals, the question rises whether there are any differences. According to Wagner, analyses of a ritual-game-story things need to examine up close the five features they share. However, she argues that the fundamental difference—or the only way to *tell* the difference—between rituals, games and stories is in how people *approach* the phenomena, not in what they 'are' in any ontological sense. This subsequently means that the same thing can mean something different to different people—and, as chapter 5 will show, something different to the same people in different contexts.

2.2.3 VIRTUAL WORLDS AND REAL LIFE

Wagner's concept of the ritual-game-story thing provides us with an analytical tool that may contribute to a deeper understanding of the processes at work when people engage in various worlds. An important dynamic that Wagner focuses on is the relationship among different realities—virtual worlds and real life; story worlds and worlds of ritual and games and everyday reality. In the following sections I zoom in on the kind of space that may develop from marked-off and therefore 'other' (presumably separate) realms. We first follow Wagner as she describes virtual worlds (a term that she and I use synonymous with 'virtual reality') as closed, bounded systems with their own reality and after that critically examines that notion. The work of British anthropologist Victor Turner constitutes the basis for

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[101] Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 43, 74.
[102] Stewart and Strathern, *Ritual*, 126.
[103] Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in* Ritual, (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 104.
[104] Wagner, *Godwired*, 63.
[105] Smith, *To Take Place*, 109.

this consideration. Section 2.2.4 will then consider the different approaches people may have to virtual worlds and what results from these different perceptions.

SOLID BOUNDARIES AND LIMINAL SPACE

Magic circles, as temporary spheres of activity with their own 'disposition', can enable us to feel deeply immersed in the world evoked by the circle. When that happens, we feel present in another place and can temporarily forget that there is an outside world.[106] Wagner argues that as the system of the magic circle's world draws us in, it provides us with 'a real sense of escape from daily grind, inviting our commitment to relationships we maintain there', which allows us to 'step temporarily outside life's rules.'[107] The idea of another reality, one where normal rules and social roles do not apply, shows strong similarities to the liminal period of rites of passage. Anthropologist Victor Turner originally theorised the concept of liminality based on earlier work of ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep and his own research on the Zambian Ndembu tribe. He was particularly interested in the dynamic between structure and process, taking into account not only the social structures and ritual patterns (and their symbolic meanings) in societies, but also how these could change through ritual processes.[108]

Turner explains liminality as the intrastructural situation or period within a rite of passage (such as an initiation rite) within which an initiand crosses from one mode of being into another. Van Gennep studied rites of passage and explained them as processes in which ritual participants enter another realm (in a process of separation-transition-incorporation) via a (sometimes symbolic) threshold or 'limen', such as a home or a temple. Turner further developed Van Gennep's ideas by arguing that during this phase of transition, initiands are 'betwixt and between' societal structures and ordinary space and time (i.e., both destructured and prestructured).[109] Liminality therefore provides a unique setting that, because of its 'betwixt and between'-ness, involves a levelling process of uniformity and anonymity that turns participants into a kind of sacred community. This so-called communitas is, within certain limits, given the freedom to speculate about their own culture. Such speculation often involves playful behaviour in which initiands play with familiar elements from their culture in ways that defamiliarise them. For example, initiands can inverse, blur or recombine normal categories and symbolic distinctions, such as the oppositions between male/female, human/animal, and life/death.[110]

Turner explains that liminality brings about a certain indeterminacy or unsettledness: cultural elements can through ludic behaviour be arranged in 'grotesque ways', i.e. they can be combined in any possible pattern, no matter how weird or transgressive.[111] Liminality therefore may be especially inviting to the performance of taboo behaviour. Furthermore, the cultural creativity and novelty that liminality provides may carry back to the structures of normal life, which means that liminal spheres can function as 'the seedbeds of cultural creativity' from which new models, rules and symbols may arise.[112] Liminality is therefore not only a sphere in which we can let of steam by being disorderly, it also involves

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[106] Wagner, *Godwired*, 86-87.
[107] Ibid., 151.
[108] Stewart and Strathern, *Ritual*, 49.
[109] It is noteworthy that the liminal or transition period often has few of the attributes present in normal reality; but the ones that are present may well be the most crucial to said culture. Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 24.
[110] Ibid., 26-27.
[111] Ibid., 27-28.
[112] Ibid., 28.

a kind of play that can convey serious messages about social relationships and teach us something new.[113] For this reason, Turner refers to liminality as the 'subjunctive of culture': a cultural mood or mode that is focused on potentiality and opens up towards possibilities for what may, could or should be (a world of what-if, instead of the indicative mood of what *is*). As Turner describes it, liminality is a process of destruction and reconstruction that ultimately has the power to change actuality through the transformations brought about by liminal experiences and immersion into the subjunctive mood of liminality.[114] Thus, as is typical for his work, Turner explains liminality and its potential for change through the cultural dynamic of structure – process – back to structure. This ultimately leads him to argue that liminality, too, cannot 'escape the grip of (…) strong structuring principles'—as soon as 'implicit rules begin to appear which limit the possible combination of factors to certain conventional patterns, designs, or configurations, then, I think, we are seeing the intrusion of normative social structure into what is potentially and in principle a free and experimental region of culture (…).'[115]

How does the concept of liminality relate to virtual worlds? Wagner argues that our relationship to virtual reality can be described as one where virtual worlds constitute liminal spaces.[116] As temporary spheres set apart from ordinary life and normal social roles, virtual worlds have the ability to evoke an experience of communitas and afford people the freedom to explore and express things they normally cannot or are not allowed to do.[117] The virtual world is from this perspective intrastructural as it is betwixt and between the structures of ordinary life. From this viewpoint, a virtual world exists thanks to a closed or bounded magic circle that (even when a virtual world still shows resemblances to the real world, which is often the case) contains a different set of rules and thus creates a safe space in which we can express ourselves differently or engage in other behaviour than we normally would. As a result, these virtual 'world replicas' give us the freedom to engage in many forms of playful behaviour, externalise our imagination, and explore alternative modes of existence.[118] This includes transgressive practices and 'forbidden play' (such as acts of violence) that become possible now that the law and customs of ordinary life no longer count.[119] In that regard, virtual worlds involve the same kind of indeterminacy and ambiguity as liminality brings about. In addition, similar to Turner's remark that the disorder of liminality can provide a means of letting off steam, Wagner argues that 'the worlds of play evoked by video games and online worlds have the ability to generate liminal spaces giving us temporary freedoms and relieving us of the drudgery of everyday life.'[120] She cites game scholar Miroslaw Filiciak in this regard, who argued that virtual worlds provide us with a form of escapism: a means for

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[113] Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 28.

[114] Ibid., 76-77, 82-83.

[115] Ibid., 28.

[116] Wagner also opts for another way to relate liminality to virtual worlds, namely to describe the space *in between* the non-virtual and the virtual world as a limen. From the perspective that this imaginary threshold is the liminal space, the virtual world can be perceived as a performative space that provides us with a new social place and mode of being (our new status or identity being the one we have developed in the virtual world). The move *into* the virtual world (e.g. via log-in procedures) is in other words the transition phase that injects participants into a new 'space' that is betwixt and between the social expectations of real life and the expectations of the virtual world. However, for Tumblr users this imaginary 'space' is almost non-existent, because log-in procedures often involve no more than one click or finger movement and last only a few seconds; for my participants, their browser and Tumblr app had saved their username and password.

[117] Wagner, *Godwired*, 154.

[118] Ibid., 241.

[119] Ibid., 170-171.

[120] Ibid., 155

temporarily 'getting away from everyday life worries, and deriving satisfaction in doing things that we could never do in the real world.'[121]

There is, however, a catch to the escapism and transgressive possibilities afforded by liminal space. If we follow Turner in his ideas on structure and process and how liminal space can be the seedbed for new norms, models and symbols, we are confronted with the fact that closed magic circles are perhaps not as closed as they may seem, (inadvertently) leaking through to everyday reality once people return from their liminal experience. It is for this reason that within the liminal phase of rites of passage, there is often not just chaotic freedom but also some kind of control (Turner gives the example of the authority of elders over juniors), as the ambivalence of liminality is regarded as dangerous.[122] We return to this issue in the section *Persistent liminality*, but before we do, one final point needs to be addressed with regard to liminality. That is, although Turner became famous for his description of liminality, and although the concept of liminality has often been used by scholars from a range of fields, Turner actually restricted the use of the term to very specific phenomena, noting that many aspects of 'post-industrial Western society' can best be described using another term: the liminoid.

FROM LIMINAL TO LIMINOID: VICTOR TURNER'S OWN NUANCES

According to Turner, the term liminality should mostly be used in a metaphorical sense in large-scale societies. In *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982), he argues that in post-industrial societies there may still be liminal processes (e.g. in the rites surrounding fraternity or church membership), but for liminal-*like* phenomena Turner actually preferred the term 'liminoid'.[123] For Turner, the essential difference between liminality and the liminoid is the role of play within society, which relates to boundaries between work, play and leisure. He argues that in traditional liminal settings, all members of society are obligated to participate in the ritual process. Their existence being guided by natural and/or biological rhythms, the ritual process is inherently a combination of (sacred) work and (serious) play, in which play is performed in earnest as part of the ritual work and knows limits that function in service of existing societal structures and the status quo. Liminality is therefore demanding and compulsory and often invokes feelings of fear and dread as something invisible or supernatural takes place.[124]

In contrast, the relation between work and play is fundamentally different in societies that have undergone an industrial revolution. Turner argues that these societies have been arbitrarily structured along the (opposite) lines of settings for work (an as objective perceived activity that has the clear goal to earn a living) and settings for leisure (subjective activities that are explicitly non-work or anti-work, 'betwixt and between'—and thus free from—institutional, familial, and civic obligations). In other words, play and work are distinctly separated. Leisure has consequently become something that takes place along the margins, away from central processes. As a result, these 'liminoid' activities (i.e.,

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[121] Miroslaw Filiciak, "Hyperidentities: Postmodern Identity Patterns in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, eds. Mark Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003), 99.
[122] Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*," in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1967), 99-100.
[123] Turner based the '-oid' on the Greek '-eidos', literally 'like' or 'resembling.' Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 32.
[124] Ibid., 43.

activities that take place in the liminoid setting of leisure time) may be as betwixt and between as liminal spheres, but their level of freedom and complexity is far greater.

Although Turner's distinction between 'pre-industrial' and 'post-industrial' societies (the latter being in Turner's view synonymous with Western societies) remains deeply problematic, his conceptualisation of the liminoid does draw attention to specific characteristics of liminality that seem less suited for a theorisation of contemporary media phenomena and experiences. Firstly, in contrast to liminal activities, liminoid activities are not an obligation: although they can be collective and governed by rules and routines, people have a personal choice to participate in them (or not). This also means that they are mostly associated with an expectation of pleasure and enjoyment and a lack of gain; they do not necessarily serve a utilitarian or ideological purpose like liminal activities do.[125]

Secondly, liminoid activities are characterised by individual products that are continuously (not cyclically) generated in leisure time and space. As a result, they are detached from the ritual process of a rite of passage and therefore do not concern a permanent change of status nor a definitive return to normative structure that reinstates the status quo and existing values.[126] Moreover, in contrast to the anonymity and communitas of the liminal, there is attention for the individual innovator, which makes liminoid products far more idiosyncratic as they are generated by specific individuals and in specific groups.

Thirdly, because the liminoid has been arbitrarily shifted towards the 'free time' set apart from central processes (in contrast to the rites of passage that liminality is a part of), it has more freedom and independency to go *against* said processes and voice criticism. Turner notes that the liminoid because of this can create and store a multiplicity of alternative models for living, all of which are capable of directing radical change in society just as much as they can serve as instruments of political control. The dynamic of breaking things down and recreating them is in this regard far more subversive than the inversions performed in liminality. Moreover, it is less restricted: *any* combination of cultural elements and symbols can in potential be played with, thus emphasising the ludic and experimental.[127]

As the title of his book—*From Ritual to Theatre*—suggests, Turner strongly believes in the cultural significance of especially theatre as a liminoid phenomenon or setting, arguing that contemporary society has rediscovered cultural transformative modes and hence experienced a 're-turn to subjunctivity.'[128] He argues that rituals and their liminality have always fulfilled a cultural role as a subclass of social drama (i.e., conflicts that stem from structural contradictions and norm-conflicts[129]) in that they assign meaning to events through reflexively narrating and reliving them via performance.[130] Contemporary 'performative genres' such as theatre, television and other media technologies have their roots in this 'redressive' or conflict-solving phase of social drama since they function as a sort of

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[125] Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 43, 55.

[126] Ibid., 54.

[127] Ibid., 32-33, 37, 54-55.

[128] Ibid., 86.

[129] Social dramas know four phases: norm-breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration/schism. After a norm-breach occurs, there is crisis. Turner sees the liminal period as a phase of redress in which the norm-conflicts are reflexively resolved, resulting in either reintegration or schism. Ibid., 69, 75.

[130] Turner uses the work of German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey to make this point, particularly Dilthey's conceptualisation of *Erlebnis* (lived experience, that was have been 'lived through' and thought back upon), which combines the cognitive aspects of experience with the affective. Ibid., 12-18.

metacommentary on events.[131] For Turner, this means that through liminoidity's ritual-like function, performative genres contribute to world-building. The liminoid is therefore not just a freedom from societal obligations, it is also 'the freedom to enter, even to generate new symbolic worlds of entertainment, sports, games, diversions of all kinds' and 'the freedom to play… with ideas, with fantasies, with words (…), with paint (…), and with social relationships (…).'[132] It seems to me that this is precisely what our contemporary engagement in transmedia, MMORPGs and other types of virtual worlds reflects: a return to subjunctivity and the liminoid's potential cultural significance.

PERSISTENT LIMINALITY

Turner's considerations on liminality and the liminoid implies that these settings, betwixt and between as they are, are not completely detached from normal reality and structures; people play with cultural elements known from real life, transgressive and taboo behaviours derive their significance from cultural norms, and liminal/-oid experimentation can cause change and introduce new models and symbols to society even after the liminal phase has ended. Indeed, Wagner is critical of the widespread use of the concept of the magic circle by (video game) scholars. She notes that it seems as if the magic circle 'can apply to any bounded system characterised by rules and some fixed mode of performance.'[133] What is more, the solid boundaries of magic circles appear to be not solid at all.

Wagner points out that one of the biggest differences between the traditional liminal stage of a rite of passage and the liminal spaces of our virtual worlds is that we do not stay there—we constantly move back and forth between virtual worlds and everyday, lived reality. Moreover, as Turner similarly mentioned in regard to liminal play, magic circles may frame distinct systems of meaning, but cultural elements from the outside of the circle still have impact on the virtual world itself (e.g. in that the virtual world references them), and cultural meanings from the virtual world interact with the (offline) cultural contexts of its inhabitants.[134] This leads Wagner to conclude that 'the "magic circle" of a game is crossed anytime that game has meaning for our daily lives' and that 'virtual spaces generally can and do affect us after we turn off our screens.'[135] With all the things we do online, Wagner argues that 'such an experience cannot help but have offline effects as well', which is why absolute demarcations between the on- and offline seem 'increasingly naïve' to her.[136]

With regard to the relationship between the on- and offline, Wagner cites game scholars like Edward Castronova, T.L. Taylor and Celia Pearce, all of whom have called for a different approach toward virtual worlds than as closed-off magic circles. Castronova argues for example that the relation between magic circles and their outside is more like membrane than a solid boundary, which turns the magic circle into a porous 'almost-magic circle'.[137] Taylor writes that using the concept of the magic circle 'can hide (and even mystify) the much messier relationship that exists between spheres (…)' such as 'the importing of meaningful offline issues and values into online spaces.'[138] Pearce takes the negotiation and messy relationship between the online and offline even further. She refers to how people often do multiple

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[131] Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 108.
[132] Ibid., 37.
[133] Wagner, *Godwired*, 86.
[134] Ibid., 88-89.
[135] Ibid., 4.
[136] Ibid., 159.
[137] Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds*, 54.
[138] Taylor, *Play Between Worlds*, 152.

things at once when in front of a screen, having fluid experiences as they engage in multiple open windows or perform 'serious' activities in tandem with their game-play.[139] Put briefly, the magic circles of virtual worlds spill over into our everyday lives and vice versa. Because of this, Taylor in particular calls for non-dichotomous models that account for the fact that the line between being online and offline is 'messy, contested, and constantly under negotiation.'[140]

The non-dichotomous solution Wagner proposes in reaction to Taylor and others is to speak of virtual reality, not as a magic circle, but as 'streaming', i.e. 'to recognize its ability to move between worlds, to spill out from our digital devices into the physical world, to externalise our dreams, and to put them into a fluid conversation with others' dreams.'[141] Consequently, virtual worlds constitute 'persistent liminality': a liminal state of 'hovering in between' that, rather than bringing about permanent change, shapes an 'on-demand and consistently ambiguous experience of liminality, characterized by the ambiguities of game/real life, sacred/profane, ritual/play, and self/other.'[142] This leads Wagner to conclude that magic circles are hardly ever the 'sanitized fixed realm of pure fantasy that we would like to imagine it to be'[143] and are instead 'overlapping and nested' in ways that allow the other worlds to become 'present right here'.[144]

2.2.4 NEGOTIATING BOUNDARIES: RITUAL VS. GAME?

Even though (or maybe because) virtuality is constantly streaming, maintaining some kind of boundary between different realities can be helpful to people. Wagner argues that one of the main difficulties of persistent liminality is that it has become increasingly difficult to have times set apart and to recognise social and cultural boundaries, since we are always 'plugged in' via our mobile devices.[145] Thus, whereas Turner argued that contemporary society invites a distinction between work and leisure that allows for liminoid activities and settings to arise in the sphere of leisure, Wagner shows that these boundaries have become increasingly fluid and ambiguous, not in the least because our screens are with us everywhere. Although Wagner acknowledges that this can aid the breakdown of existing social hierarchies and make room for new modes of self-expression, she also describes how it may have the disadvantage to erode boundaries that help us to establish separate spheres.[146] This can, in turn, result in conflicts between people who approach or frame things differently, particularly when it concerns questions of ethics.

For example, Wagner discovered (partly reflexive and discursive) boundary-work performed by people who engaged in virtual worlds—in this case video games. During her study of *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (an evangelical Christian strategy game that has as its goal to convert civilians and enemy forces), Wagner found that Christian players approached the game as a religious ritual that served as a training module for real life; the magic circle thus being incredibly thin and spilling over its own boundaries. Dispatched U.S. soldiers who also played the game, however, explained it as 'just a game', a welcome

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[139] Pearce, *Communities of Play*, 117.
[140] Taylor, *Play Between Worlds*, 153.
[141] Wagner, *Godwired*, 89.
[142] Idem.
[143] Ibid., 180.
[144] Ibid., 161, 92.
[145] Ibid., 160.
[146] Ibid., 159-160.

escape from harsh reality; the magic circle was thick for them, the game experience rationally framed as purely imaginative gameplay. The world outside then becomes temporarily 'bracketed' so that players only have to follow the new set of rules within the game space and gain the freedom to engage in (forbidden) play. In this particular case, the different approaches of the two groups led to a conflict in which one group accused the other of misframing the nature of the activity.[147]

The issue of people framing a video game as either game or ritual brings us back at what we saw at the end of section 2.2.2: the virtual worlds created by game and ritual are so similar that our decision to call something a 'game' or a 'ritual' depends entirely upon the player/performer's own reflexive response to it. That is, how people interpret their own situation in relation to media discourses and how they negotiate their own position and identity in regard to it matters—which includes the choice of 'whether or not to see the experience as a game, a ritual, or both.'[148] After all, there is a reason Huizinga claimed that the distinction between ritual and games is mostly mental, and therefore 'excessively difficult to define.'[149] As Wagner points out, they both involve some element of narrative and conflict and are both interactive, defined by formality and structured performance. Moreover, they both involve the entry of participants into a temporary sphere in which not only fixed rules adhere, but in which there is also room for play. The difference that remains is that ritual experiences make ultimate claims in that they are often *intended* to affect our lives in some way and *expected* to be performed in earnest (even when they involve playful or entertaining behaviour). They do not exist for their own sake but frame something as real or valuable, casting their meaning self-consciously back into the world. Games, in contrast, make limited claims as their ability to affect reality is often denied or ignored.[150]

In the end, conflicts surrounding framings show that people's (reflexive) approach to ritual-game-story things (i.e., how they frame the ritual-game-story thing) matters. As Wagner has shown, ritual-game-story things can be serious, playful, or both; they can be limited to their own liminal/-oid space or spill over their boundaries, being persistently liminal; they can be approached as simply a means of escape, a way of imagining ourselves being elsewhere or being somebody else, or they can be closely intertwined with our social and political realities, insisting on something ultimate that appears real and/or can make an actual difference.[151] In conclusion, the degree of ritual, game, or story in a ritual-game-story thing differs and constantly changes—and the only way to better understand these dynamics is to observe and talk to the people who actually engage in ritual-game-story things from the context of their daily lives, examining both what they are doing and how they make sense of what they are doing.

2.3 DYNAMIC FRAMINGS AND EVERDAY LIFE

2.3.1 RITUAL FRAMING, REVISITED

Rachel Wagner's arguments about world-building, the magic circle, and persistent liminality function as useful descriptions of the possible interrelations between virtual worlds and everyday reality and the

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[147] Wagner, *Godwired*, 164-166, 175, 186.
[148] Ibid., 165-166.
[149] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 14.
[150] Wagner, *Godwired*, 76-77, 179-180.
[151] Ibid., 74-77.

ways in which people manage these different realities. However, someone who more closely examines the dynamic between different realities in the context of everyday life is anthropologist Terhi Utriainen. She offers one possible way to unravel the ways in which other realities may be both welcomed and perceived as a risk within everyday contexts, using ethnographic methods to examine people's personal approaches to and navigation of different realities in daily life. Although Utriainen's work is concerned with a wholly other phenomenon (i.e., angel practices among Finnish women) she too is interested in the techniques through which imagination (in this case religious imagination) is enacted and made to feel real. She examines in this context the skills, practices and devices by which people relate and adjust the reality of angelic presence to other (more secular) social realities that they also participate in and cannot or do not want to ignore.[152] In other words, Utriainen is also studying the dynamic between different realities or 'worlds' and emphasises the role of *framing* in this process.

I already mentioned the term framing in section 2.2.2, but perhaps now is the moment to revisit the concept and elaborate it. The conceptualisation of sociologist Erving Goffman might be the most well-known attempt at describing frames. He defines frames as schemes through which we interpret a situation and that guide how we describe an event and organise our experience.[153] In Utriainen's words: frames communicate the kind of reality and knowledge we are dealing with and tell us what it is what is going on.[154] One of the central concepts in Goffman's theorizing is the concept of 'keying': a set of conventions by which an activity that already has been framed (i.e., is given a first-level meaning) is understood to be something else. Keying plays a crucial role in determining what it is we think is really going on and can completely change our idea of what is going on. For example, fighting and playing at fighting are two completely different things even though they involve the same activity, whereas playing at fighting and playing at being royalties involve different activities, but nevertheless are perceived as the same sort of thing (i.e., playing). A frame can thus be keyed in a way that completely changes someone's perception of what is going on.[155]

For Goffman, the power of framing lies in its capacity to separate practices of living, enabling people to experience different 'realms' or 'worlds'.[156] Life is therefore organised via many different kinds of (often overlapping) frames, such as play, theatre, art, ritual or politics.[157] Ritual scholars are particularly interested in the topic of framing, because ritual is inherently involved with acts of boundary marking that set something apart as special, valuable and powerful. Utriainen, too, defines ritualisation as the 'in some ways structured material and imaginary techniques and practices with which to organize, tend to or transform important matters.'[158] She furthermore makes use of Jonathan Z. Smith's theory of ritual to describe rituals specifically as devices to direct the attention in special ways in order to make a difference. The ritual frame is ritual's primary way of doing so: something is set apart (for example by being or taking place in a sacred space, which then functions as the frame), and through the operation

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[152] Utriainen, "Ritually Framing Enchantment," 53.

[153] Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 8-11, 21.

[154] Utriainen, "Lived Religion," forthcoming.

[155] Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 43-45.

[156] Ibid., 46.

[157] Utriainen, "Lived Religion," forthcoming.

[158] Idem.

of setting apart that 'something' becomes non-mundane (or 'sacred'), something powerful and more valuable than the surrounding things, even if it would be ordinary in any other context.[159]

The ritual frame can be spatial, but it can also be temporal or can involve special sounds, language, or clothing. Utriainen gives the example of angel healing and meditation practices that are often marked by creating a relaxed place and mood, for example via lighting a candle, closing the eyes, and playing music in the background.[160] She also emphasises that it is the act of framing that brings about, makes possible, or enacts and/or communicates specific desired effects, such as a change of status, mood or capacity or the presence of something otherworldly. Utriainen refers in this regard to Adam B. Seligman, who (like Turner) argued that ritual framing creates a subjunctive mood in which potentialities, possibilities and creative illusion open up to the participants (a so-called 'as if' mode over life).[161] She writes that as the ritual frame creates its 'own pocket of reality, with (to some extent at least) its own logic, rules and ontology' some things become possible in 'different ways inside the frame compared to how they would outside of it', which makes it possible to see or relate to things in new ways.[162]

Utriainen argues that the ritual frame enables people to bring something extraordinary into contact with the everyday. According to her, this generally involves some kind of aim to change something on the level of the everyday; a wish for difference, even if that is no more than a temporary change of perspective.[163] Thus, like Wagner, Utriainen emphasises the intended efficacy of ritual. According to her, this furthermore means that ritual's subjunctive mood not only enables a shift of perspective that helps people on a communal level integrate and deal with the complexities of pluralistic societies (something Seligman stressed), it also plays an important role in individual and private life interaction.[164]

2.3.2 SKILFULLY NAVIGATING REALITIES

Essential to Utriainen's argument is the idea that ritual and ritualisation not always involve clear boundary marks. She writes: 'There are occasions when the ritual frame is a more imperceptible, delicate and smooth operation that is intimately and complexly interlaced with non-ritual reality.'[165] Utriainen found that angel practitioners often engage in very subtle and bypassing everyday ritualisation in which angels are temporarily (and sometimes only in passing) 'drawn down' to touch mundane life. This can be so subtle that it becomes nearly unnoticeable and communicated only to the practitioner herself.[166] Moreover, Utriainen's participants were able to play with the ritual frame by keying in and out of it in ways that were sensitive to their environment and the social context they were in. This was necessary because angel practices are often frowned upon in contemporary Finnish society, which risks the practitioner's social credibility and the credibility of the (life enriching) angels. The practitioners therefore needed to know when, where and how to key in and out of the ritual frame. For example, a feather could be a signal of angelic presence at one moment, but in another context (particularly in the presence of people who would dismiss the idea of angels) it would be just a feather or *return* to just

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[159] Utriainen, "Lived Religion," forthcoming.
[160] Utriainen, "Ritually Framing Enchantment," 48.
[161] Adam B. Seligman, "Ritual and Sincerity: Certitude and the Other," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36(1) (2010): 9-39.
[162] Utriainen, "Ritually Framing Enchantment," 54.
[163] Ibid., 50-51.
[164] Utriainen, "Lived Religion," forthcoming.
[165] Idem.
[166] Utriainen, "Ritually Framing Enchantment," 54.

being a feather—or it could be both, almost simultaneously.[167] Likewise, an angel could be a real and powerful spiritual presence, while in another context an "angel" would be mere imagination and only a metaphor.[168] Thus, in order to enrich their lives without risking their shared social realities, the angel practitioners developed the skill to negotiate the relationship between their different worlds, so that these could support and enrich rather than reject each other.

Based on her findings, Utriainen further developed a theory of ritual framing that accounts for the dynamic, fleeting instances of ritualisation and how these are interlaced with the everyday. For this, she draws on the work of anthropologist Don Handelman. Goffman's frame theory traditionally describes a process of 'lamination' in which different keyings are hierarchically or linearly inscribed in the frame; there are two separate, subsequent states, the frame being a precisely nested distinction between the two.[169] Handelman, however, describes the inside and outside of a ritual frame like the two sides of a Moebius ring: they can slide into one another in imperceptible, improvised and otherwise 'fuzzy' ways, sometimes without clear difference. The two sides of the frame are therefore flexible and porous, the frame best being understood as being in process with itself as if it were a braid.[170] Based on this idea, Utriainen argues that ritual can best be seen as a 'wave or pulse of ritualizing that comes and goes in the midst of everyday life.'[171] Moreover, she argues that it becomes possible that, through the dynamic of process of braiding, different realities may slide into one another. In her own research, she found that this resulted in a 'complexity of perspectives' that—when managed skilfully—could become a coping or enriching device within the complex social reality of everyday life.[172]

In sum, Utriainen struggled with a similar kind of 'messiness' between realms as Wagner and other virtual reality scholars did—a messiness in which there are no solid boundaries that separate realms in a clear or constant manner. Utriainen's solution has been to (further) develop a theory of ritual framings that accounts for the dynamic ways in which people negotiate (to varying degrees) the fleeting and sometimes almost unnoticeable boundaries between different realities. Her conceptualisation of ritualisation as a tactical process that 'actualises as well as de-actualises quickly and more or less smoothly'[173], with sometimes only temporary effects like a subjunctive mood or sense of enchantment that comes and goes depending on context, may provide a valuable perspective from which to examine the ways in which Tumblr multifandom bloggers navigate between the reality of Tumblr's virtual world, the transmediated worlds of their fandoms, and their everyday lived reality.

2.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter built the theoretical framework used to analyse Tumblr as a cultural place that people both do things *on* and do things *with* in the context of their everyday lives. Immediately, the theoretical overview reveals several connections between different theories. For example, Wagner writes about fan fiction in relation to ritual-game-story things, Stein's elaborations on transformative work as a

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[167] Utriainen, "Ritually Framing Enchantment," 54.
[168] Ibid., 57.
[169] Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 82. See also Don Handelman, "Framing," in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, ed. Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek and Michael Stausberg (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 571-582.
[170] Utriainen, "Ritually Framing Enchantment," 53.
[171] Ibid., 54.
[172] Ibid., 53-54.
[173] Utriainen, "Lived Religion," forthcoming.

process of remix that both deconstructs and rearranges reminds of Turner's descriptions of liminal play, Utriainen and Wagner both approach possible relationships between different worlds as an issue of framing, and the notion of subjunctivity—the mode of possibility, multiplicity and what-if—reveals itself either implicitly or explicitly in the work of all authors. In the chapters that follow, I further explore these relationships in the context of my own case study: media fans and their use and understandings of the (activities on) the blogging platform Tumblr.

The elaborate picture Louisa Stein has drawn of the contemporary media landscape will be used throughout the analytic chapters to analyse (the development of) specific fan practices on Tumblr and pinpoint common ideas about fandom and fannish behaviour. Stein's findings highlight the importance of digital platforms and their technological and cultural structures in the development of fan cultures that revolve around emotionally driven, collective transformative work. Moreover, Stein suggests that digital platforms allow formerly taboo fannish practices to become increasingly mainstream, penetrating other social realities that people engage in and enabling the breakdown of existing binaries. For Stein, this is a mostly positive development that allows for inclusion and multiplicity within fan communities and beyond—an argument I will reconsider in the conclusion of this thesis.

The work of Rachel Wagner provides useful perspectives from which to approach people's engagement in other realities and the practices and experiences that develop from this engagement. Wagner draws parallels between transmediated and virtual worlds and ritual (or religious) worlds and their relationship to the 'real world' by means of Johan Huizinga's prominent work on magic circles and her own conceptualisation of the ritual-game-story thing. In (primarily) chapters 4 and 5, I apply Wagner's theoretical insights and explore how they can be used to make sense of fandom on Tumblr and people's own accounts and experiences of the platform. Victor Turner's theory on liminality and the closely related liminoid (the 'subjunctives' of culture in which people can play with cultural elements) will prove to be an especially promising analytic tool in this regard—a connection first made by Wagner through her concept of 'persistent liminality', although my findings will force me to re-examine this notion.

Wagner's theory on persistent liminality results from the complex, often messy relationship between on- and offline realms. In a similar manner, anthropologists and ritual scholars have been concerned with the relationship between ritual and non-ritual realities and the ways in which people negotiate the boundaries between different worlds. In chapter 5, I show that Terhi Utriainen's notion of dynamic ritual framings, as fleeting acts of ritualisation that allow people to sensitively key in and out different realities, can aid in our understanding of people's engagement in and negotiation of the virtual, fannish reality of Tumblr in relation to their lived reality. Keeping Wagner's conceptualisation of the ritual-game-story thing in mind, chapter 5 also makes an attempt at examining the ambiguous nature of Tumblr fan culture from a perspective that considers people's own (seemingly conflicting) perceptions of fandom and fiction.

CHAPTER 3 TUMBLR'S MATERIAL STRUCTURES AND TECHNOLOGICAL AFFORDANCES

Chapter 2 mentioned several scholars who emphasise the importance of digital structures in the development of online spaces, practices and experiences. This chapter therefore focuses on Tumblr's interface features and technological affordances in an attempt to find out what Tumblr's material structures are, and how they shape fan practice on Tumblr and media fans' use of Tumblr in everyday life. One the one hand, I describe how Tumblr's software provides the basis for Tumblr's broader cultural and social structures and how it shapes people's practices and experiences both on the platform and of the platform as a whole. On the other hand, I show how fans have adjusted and refined Tumblr's affordances in order to create a space that feels like their own and suits their own (sometimes fan-specific) needs. In addition, I discuss the Tumblr app and its affordances and explore how this shapes people's use and experience of Tumblr in daily life.

3.1 THE DASHBOARD

3.1.1 PERFORMING FROM HOME BASE

TYPES OF PERFORMANCES ON TUMBLR

One of Tumblr's core interface features is the dashboard. As a micro-blogging platform, Tumblr is a type of blogosphere, which means that all weblogs created via the website *Tumblr.com* are interconnected through the same network (i.e., Tumblr). In practice, this means that every Tumblr user has a personal 'dashboard'; a kind of scroll back log that forms the home page for Tumblr users. As soon as users log in (which in practice is generally no more than opening an internet window, a tab or the app, as these have often memorised the username and password), they are directed to their 'dash' from which they can operate their weblog. The dashboard gives access to basically all options Tumblr offers: the head bar that allows you to create posts; the search bar to search and track hashtags; the menus through which you can customise your weblog and monitor your blog's activity (if and who shared, liked, or commented on your posts); and the buttons that give access to the message inbox, chat system, and the overview of your subscriptions (your 'followers' and who you are 'following'). Interaction with Tumblr's interface thus happens mostly via the dashboard.

The main function of the dashboard is that it enables you to view, search and visit entries posted at other weblogs. Once someone posts an entry, it appears on the dashboard of their followers or of the people who track any of the hashtags added to the entry. Viewing entries that have appeared on your dashboard is for many people the core activity they perform when on Tumblr; 'being on Tumblr' most of the time means 'scrolling through my dash'. Viewing others' entries can result in reblogging them (meaning that you re-post an entry someone else has created on your own blog via the 'reblog' function, thus preserving the link to the original source and previous rebloggers), but it can also proceed to be no more than viewing entries without interacting with any of them (an activity also referred to as 'lurking').

Although reblogged entries appear on your own weblog, they are different from your own posts; your own posts are entries created by yourself and that you are therefore the 'original poster' (OP) of. In sum, this means that at interface level there are three types of performance people can engage in: they can create and post new content, they can search for and view content with the goal to reblog entries, and they can search for and view content simply for the purpose of viewing.
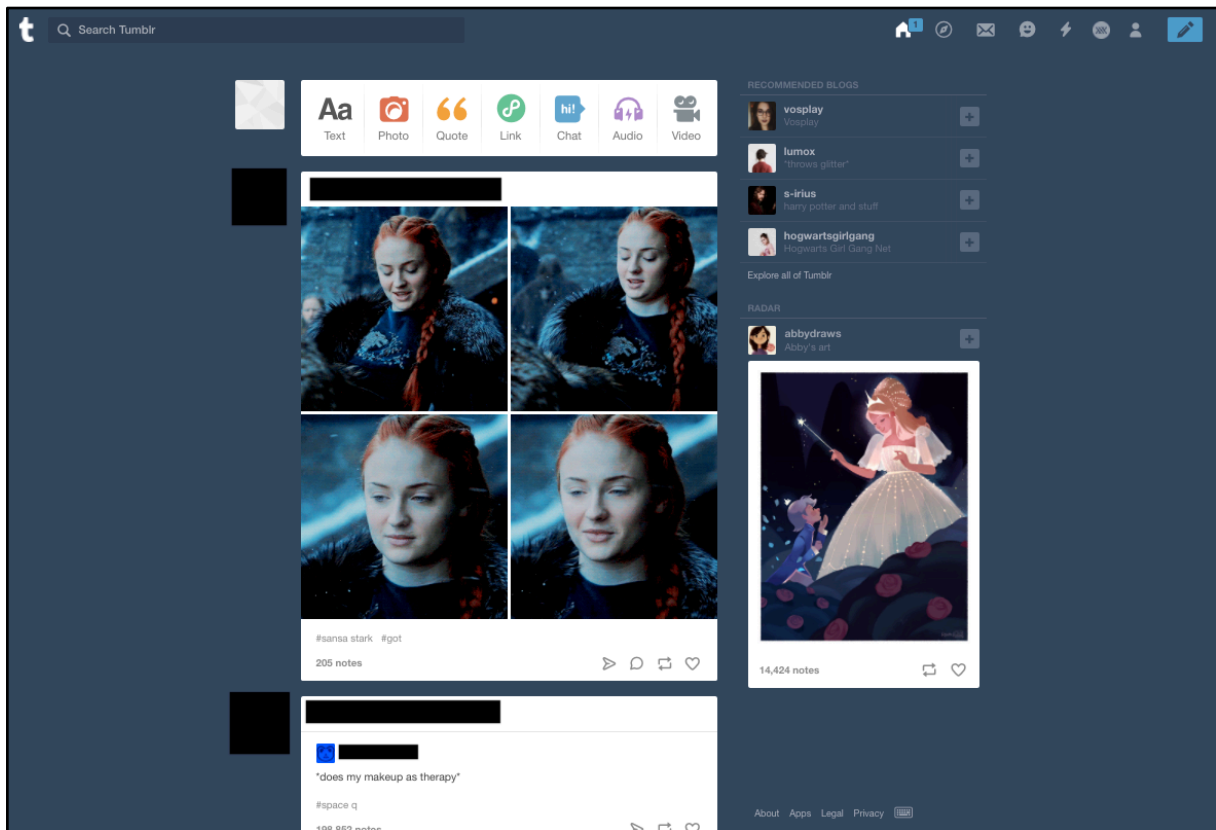
FIGURE 1. SCREENSHOT OF THE DASHBOARD. ON TOP, YOU HAVE THE SEARCH BAR AND MENUS TO NAVIGATE YOUR WEBLOG. THE CENTRE OF THE INTERFACE SHOWS YOUR ICON, THE BUTTONS TO CREATE ENTRIES, AND THE ENTRIES OF USERS AND HASHTAGS YOU FOLLOW. THE RIGHT-SIDE MENU SHOWS RECOMMENDED AND PROMOTED BLOGS THAT TUMBLR SELECTS BASED ON YOUR INTERESTS.

Next to the difference between posting, reblogging and lurking, people—when posting—can choose from a variety of post types that all involve different (combinations of) media. These are: **1)** text posts that can be as long as you like, and to which you can add (moving) pictures[174]; **2)** photo sets that consist of one or more (moving) pictures, to which you can add text that is displayed below the pictures; **3)** quotes, which appear in a different font; **4)** 'chat posts' that show imagined or retold conversations in again another font; **5)** audio messages; **6)** videos; **7)** links to for example another website or a news article; and lastly **8)** ask posts, which are messages users answer publicly on their weblog. These affordances have been used by fans to develop a specific set of cultural practices that is predominantly visual (involving primarily post types 1, 2 and 8—see appendix A for an elaborate overview of all practices[175]). As Louisa Stein argues, the visuality of Tumblr has resulted (among other things) in an embodied performance of 'feels' and shared affect. In addition, the visual depiction of (interactions

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[174] Moving pictures are known as GIFs (Graphics Interchange Format).
[175] For those unfamiliar with fan culture in general or Tumblr fandom in particular, I highly recommend reading this appendix before you proceed.

between) characters, places, objects and other elements from the (trans)mediated worlds of media texts allow people to not only *talk* about their objects of fandom, but also repeatedly *encounter* them whenever they want via entering Tumblr. For some of my participants, these encounters interrelated with the re-experience or amplification of specific emotions, feelings and aesthetic pleasures; with memories and other ways of thinking back on events that occurred either in the media world or in their own lives at the time; and with an experienced intensification of their own fannishness and engagement in fandom.

A PLACE OF ONE'S OWN

The fact that users refer to their dashboard as 'my dash' (rather than *the* dash) reflects the personal nature of the dashboard. Because the dashboard is the homepage from where users operate their weblog, it is quite understandable that users do everything they can to make the space as habitable as possible. In the past, alterations in the lay-out of the dashboard (such as a different location of the reblog button or a different window from which to view your blog's activity) have been met with complaints from users, and many of them use an external application called XKit to tweak Tumblr's interface to their own liking. For example, XKit makes it easier to reblog things quickly, it allows you to go back to an interface layout from before specific updates, it can add an outbox to your message inbox, and it gives the option to remove advertisements and 'blacklist' specific hashtags in order to prevent them from being shown on your dashboard.[176]

The option to blacklist, in addition to the fact that people make their own choices in the users and hashtags they follow (and thus let appear on their dash), allows people to create—as one of my interviewees called it—their own 'bubble' through which they can engage with topics. Managing the content that appears on you dash allows you to adjust it fully to your own tastes and interests, deliberately filtering out the things you do not want to see. Several of my interviewees translated this into Tumblr being a personal, private place—one that you generally do not show to others and preferably visit when you are alone because it is so much suited to your personal likes.

THE PRESENCE OF OTHERS

In general, people's presence on Tumblr can be fully located on and around the dashboard; it is the place from where users operate nearly everything that has to do with their blog and therefore is where they generally 'are' or feel present when they go on Tumblr. This can create a somewhat individualised experience. After all, you (generally) sit alone in front of a screen or device and have the ability to stay anonymous. You only need to provide an email address, an age, and a username when you sign up for a Tumblr account. Other users only see the username, which within Tumblr fan culture mostly refers to the user's fandom(s) and rarely reveals someone's real name. What is more, you do not have to create your own content and interaction with others is not required to make use of the platform's features. In other words, you can simply lurk around to view and reblog posts without ever approaching the individuals behind those posts, and without ever conveying any information about yourself. As a result, people can have hundreds of followers without knowing much about them. Amber explained for instance how reblogging posts and receiving notes is quite different from the interaction she had with

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[176] Since Yahoo! bought Tumblr in 2013, advertisements have been showing up among blog entries on users' dashboards.

fellow fans on previous platforms. According to her, 'now it's a bit more as if we're all screaming into the void.' Being on Tumblr can thus feel like a lonely endeavour at times, especially in the beginning when you have to figure out all technological features and cultural norms on your own.

Despite this, most users do not feel alone when on Tumblr and are in fact highly aware of the presence of others. Until recently, Tumblr did not reveal any information about someone's online or offline status. The only way to establish someone's presence (including your own) was therefore to post or reblog something in order to let an entry—accompanied by your username and icon—appear on other people's dashboard. In that regard, and in line with for example the argument of computer-mediated communication scholar Susan Herring, the content that results from fans' conscious engagement with the interface can be regarded as 'doing, in the truest performative sense.'[177] As a result, the dashboard has become not simply a means to manage your weblog and view other people's content, it is also where each other's activity and presence is felt. This becomes particularly clear when considering the ways in which users manage their own presence on the platform and convey to their followers if they are (or in the near future will be) present.

For example, people add to their weblog's description that they are on '(semi-)hiatus' and thus largely absent for a while. Not only does such visitor information on weblogs' home pages indicate an awareness of other people following your Tumblr activities, it also means that users feel compelled to account for a lack of activity. In addition, in order to avoid a lack of activity altogether, some people do keep posting entries via their 'queue' while they are away: a storage function that automatically posts entries at appointed times of the day. By queueing posts, people are able to spread their posts throughout the day (avoiding spikes in their activity) and can post things without actually being present on the platform. Posts like that are often tagged as such (e.g. '#queue') so that followers know that the user is, in fact, not present. The other way around, some people deliberately refrain from using a queue so that followers will immediately notice their absence. Furthermore, updates and inquiries after someone's presence on the platform are common. For example, I encountered text posts from my participants that told their followers that they were 'gone for a while' or that they 'miss being here'. Such updates make sense, considering that one of my interviewees spoke of 'seeing someone on your blog every day'—if activity suddenly stops, followers will notice.

In conclusion, Tumblr's interface features result in a blogging experience that involves various types of performance via different media. Despite users experiencing their weblog and dashboard as a private place that (partly by means of personal tweaks and external apps) can be adjusted to personal tastes, being active on Tumblr simultaneously involves the performance for an audience that is constantly kept in mind.

3.1.2 COLLECTIVE PERFORMANCE AND THE DISCOURSE OF PROFESSIONALISM

The strong experience of other people being present in the same space does not only reveal the public and performative nature of blogging, it also points to the collective nature of blog posts as described by Louisa Stein and Paul Booth (section 2.1). These descriptions reflect common notions of fanwork as collective, collaborative and public practice, such as Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson's explanation of

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[177] Susan Herring, "Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis: An Approach to Researching Online Behavior," in *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*, eds. Sasha Barab, Rob Kling and James H. Gray (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 338.

fanwork as 'work in progress' and Francesca Coppa's analysis of fan fiction as theatrical performance.[178] Booth argues that a blog post is always an in potential collective text in that its author is not just the original poster but also every other person that commented on the post.[179] In line with Booth's reasoning, Stein argues that blog posts invite collective participation through for instance comments and hashtags that function as transformative layers that expand the (layers of meaning) of both source text and blog posts. Specifically, she notes that blog posts on Tumblr ask for 'individual collective affirmation through re-blogging', the notifications on posts allowing for a shared, collective passion to become visible.[180]

The notifications (or 'notes' for short) are indeed a clear sign of the collective nature of user performances on Tumblr. Every time someone likes or reblogs a post, a note is added to it. The number of notes is therefore an indicator of the engagement with and reach of a post or its OP. Users are strongly aware of their entries' public nature, posts' development as a collective work, and the social capital related to notes. Many or a lack of notes can draw attention ('why do others (not) like it?') and many users like to gain a high number of notes on their posts and enjoy reading others' reactions. Therefore, in order to accomplish a wide reach, they consciously post new entries at times when they know a lot of people are online and hence able to immediately see it pass on their dashboard. This increases the possibility of collective engagement or affirmation via likes and reblogs. Users also reblog themselves at different intervals in order to make as many people as possible aware of their new post, and I once encountered an entry that described optimal posting hours for fan artists. Three of my interviewees also mentioned that they sometimes reblog an entry from someone else for the explicit reason that 'more people should see it'.

What do the collective fan performances look like? When reblogging an entry, my participants generally add their own commentary in the hashtags. These reblogged entries frequently already exist out of an original entry plus comments. For example, with regard to analyses of scene fragments, people can reblog in agreement of an entry or reblog to share the new-found perspective with their own followers. They might also add additional information or insights to the posts or convey their own thoughts through a comment or via the hashtags. With regard to headcanons and AUs, people exchange ideas or add to the lists and writings of others as well. Headcanons and AUs are also exchanged as prompts: requests or suggestions from fellow fans to fan creators to write, draw or otherwise create something in particular, and that creators often ask for and happily take up on (provided that it suits their own interests). And sometimes, when people disagree with or are unconvinced of a theory or depiction, posts develop into a discussion between fans. Like Stein and Booth argued, in all these instances layers of meanings are added to the posts and they become communal, ever-changing texts. Moreover, this confirms that fans indeed negotiate media texts not only through their engagement with the text itself, but also through discussion with each other.

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[178] Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson. "Introduction: Work in Progress," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. idem (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 6-8; Francesca Coppa, "Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance," in *The Fan Fiction Studies* Reader, eds. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014).
[179] Booth, *Digital Fandom*, 43.
[180] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 154-156.
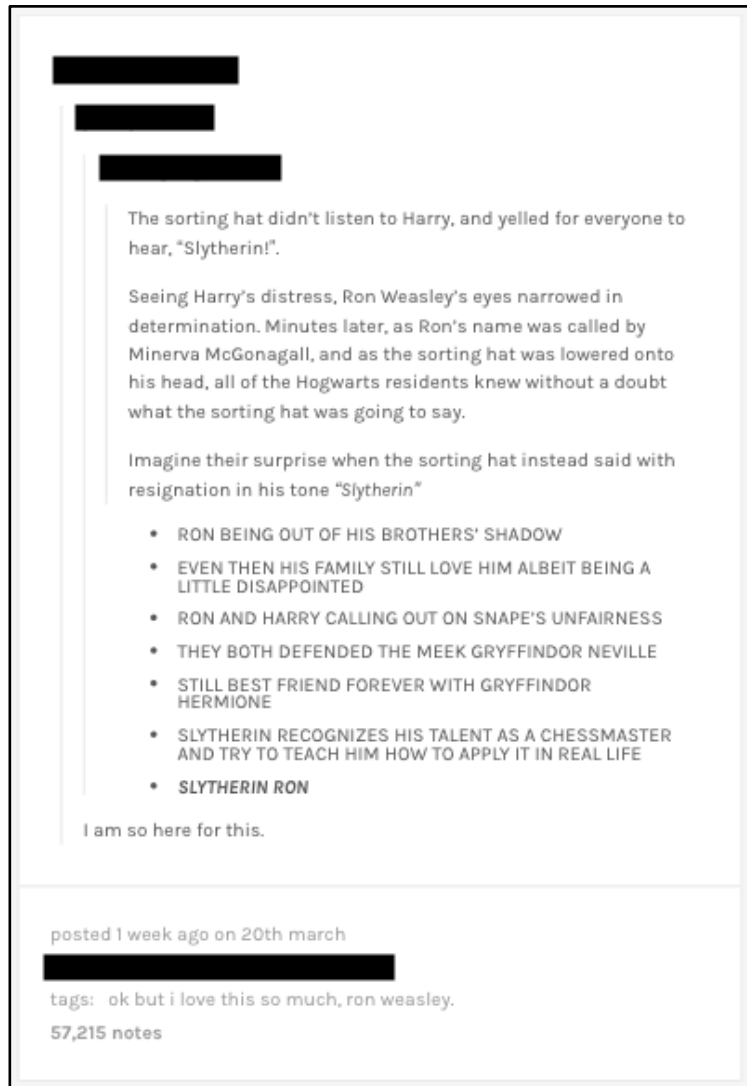
FIGURE 2. EXAMPLE OF THE COLLECTIVE NATURE OF TUMBLR POSTS. USERS (NAMES HERE PRESENTED AS BLACK BOXES) CAN ADD SOMETHING NEW TO THE ORIGINAL POST, ELABORATING ITS MEANING. OTHER USERS CAN THEN REBLOG THE POST AS ONE ENTRY.

However, not all posts are part of the collective performativity. In contrast to collective performances, when posting about something very personal, some people tag their post with the explicit request to their followers to not reblog the entry (e.g. '#don't reblog') so that the entry will not reach any further and stays an individual entity. In addition, although reblogging is by many accepted as a way to share and add to existing work, re*posting* is controversial and disliked by many creators as it discards the actual sources of the work and often makes it seem as if the reposter is the creator of the post (in effect 'stealing' the work of others). This confirms that the by Stein mentioned 'discourse of professionalism', in which the skill and rights of individual creators are foregrounded, has found its way onto the platform.[181]

In this context, the use of hashtags as comments does not only contribute to the collective performativity of blog posts, it also serves as further proof of the influence of the discourse of professionalism within fan culture. The fact that people use hashtags to convey their feelings and

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[181] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 159.

thoughts is because direct comments on a post leave their mark: an in-post reply to an entry alters the post itself as it remains stuck to the original post and adds to its text, thus expanding the post's meaning. In figure 2 (p. 42) for example, the blog post contains not only the original post ('The sorting hat didn't listen to Harry...'), but also the bullet points added by another user through their reply, as well as yet another user's 'I am so here for this'. Comments in the hashtags, however, can only be seen in the specific reblog and are thus, despite contributing to the collective conversation, *less* a part of the post itself—once someone else reblogs the post, the tags are left behind (in this case my participant's 'ok but i love this so much'. One of my interviewees, Benthe, used a clever analogy to explain why you in principle should use the hashtags to comment on posts. She told me:

> It's just something you shouldn't be doing, you know, it's a beginner's mistake. (...) If you add something to a post, then most of the time people don't like it because, the people who make it they – the caption belongs to the post. So, the caption is part of the post, so to say. So if you put something else below it, then it's like... as if you go to a museum and there's a sign next to the painting, and you go and add another sign beneath the first one that says: "oh, amazing" or something, "beautiful painting", you know. In a museum it's generally like: the sign is part of it, what it is about, or the name, but it's not like you add something beneath it yourself or anything.

Moreover, it is considered rude to delete the captions of original posters (i.e., the text that accompanies visual posts, in this regard specifically the description the OP wrote beneath the images and that is used to explain a perspective on, topic of, or meaning or reason behind the post—see also figure 3, p. 44):

> What's even worse is... when you make something, it always shows your icon and URL and below those your caption. Some people delete the caption and write something beneath it so that their icon becomes visible over there, and then it's almost as if *they* have made it, or... even when you can still see the source, but sometimes – you know, people go to *that* blog instead of to the person who made it. Removing captions is just – you shouldn't be doing that because it's part of the post. I mean, you don't go to a museum and remove the sign. You know, that's like... that's what it feels like, I suppose.

Benthe's remarks reveal how, despite the importance of collectivity, the notion of individual creators and their (static) works of art plays an important role that shapes norms and expectations within Tumblr fan culture. In other words, while reblogging content is appreciated and creators enjoy reading comments on their work, unwritten rules have developed as to where these comments belong in order to preserve the original work and the artist's description of it.

In sum, the dashboard facilitates different types of performance and is where people's presence can be located. People have made use of Tumblr's affordances (and when necessary, tweaked them) to adjust their dashboard to their own preferences and interests, which gives the platform a personal, private touch. Even so, blogging via Tumblr remains an inherently public activity that contributes to fan culture's collective nature—a collective nature that increasingly exists in tension with a discourse of professionalism that via implicit rules surrounding the use of specific digital features seems to restrict the unlimited distribution and transformation of posts.

> Oh yes, the past can hurt. But the way I see it, you can either run from it, or learn from it.

> posted 1 week ago on 22nd march

> tags: disney, queue know who.
> 4,698 notes
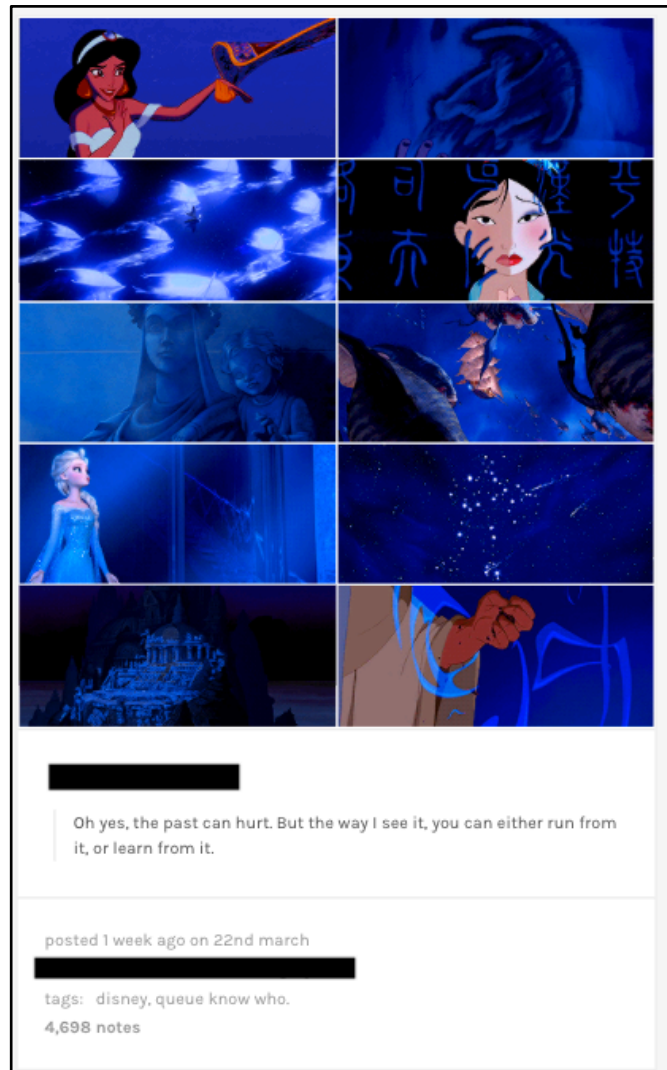
FIGURE 3. EXAMPLE OF THE CAPTION'S IMPORTANCE. IN THIS POST, THE CAPTION ESTABLISHES THE MESSAGE OF THE POST.

3.2 THE MANY USES OF HASHTAGS

3.2.1 STRUCTURING TUMBLR

The specific use of hashtags to comment on posts already reveals something about the many ways in which Tumblr users make use of hashtags. Hashtags are essential to Tumblr's technological and sociocultural structure. Users can 'tag' their posts with whichever hashtag they like. The main function of hashtags is to organise blog entries based on the key terms users give to them. This is not a watertight system, but it allows users to search for tagged key terms to find posts (and the users who created those posts) that correspond to their own interests. Users can then decide to follow a tag or a user so that every new post from said tag or user shows up on their dashboard. In turn, others can do the same, which means you can obtain your own followers and 'mutuals' (i.e., those whom you follow and who follow you back). This search-and-follow system that relies on the use of hashtags has made Tumblr into a place where users gather around specific topics, resulting in the formation of different interest-based groups that I will call 'hashtag groups'. Hashtag groups on Tumblr form the basis of Tumblr's cultural

and social structures. They are in many respects typical 'networks', by Rachel Wagner described as fields of interaction that define a group of people who are in contact with one another online, even though they may not all know each other and might or might not interact.[182]

Within a hashtag group, blog posts can circulate fast and spread widely. For example, on several occasions during my fieldwork, I encountered posts that I had seen just moments earlier via another weblog; even among my small set of twenty participants the circulation of posts within a hashtag group became apparent. Two technological aspects of the platform contribute to this dynamic. First, the amount of content produced on the platform is substantial. Because Tumblr is a microblogging platform, it is accepted and common to post short entries, and to do so frequently. With a few simple clicks, a user can create or upload text posts, photo sets and digital drawings, one-sentence quotes, short conversations, and audio or video fragments. According to Tumblr's own numbers, users currently post 29.5 million blog posts per day, with a total of 161.8 *billion* posts that circulate within the overarching Tumblr.com-network.[183] Second, the circulation of posts is aided by the option to reblog an entry you like in order to post it on your own weblog and let it show up on the dashboard of your followers. Reblogging involves no more effort than a few clicks and is therefore an important reason why entries can reach far very quickly. Together, the ease with which users can create posts and reblog the posts of others have resulted in visible bursts of activity and the ability of posts to travel swiftly through a hashtag group.

The frequent recurrence of the same posts, aided by Tumblr's technological structures, can be viewed as a strong indicator of a procedural rhetoric or ritualised structure on the platform. As mentioned in the section 2.2.2 (*The 'ritual-game-story thing'*), the procedural rhetoric of a virtual world involves the programmed structures that guide our experience, encourage specific behaviour, and can make (ideological) arguments through their script. The concept stems from game theory, but it is comparable to what most ritual scholars would recognise as the liturgical order of ritual, which likewise structures experience and can create cultural values. For example, anthropologist Roy Rappaport sees the liturgical order as the heart of ritual. According to him, ritual derives its power from these 'more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances repeated in specified contexts.'[184] These formal acts are 'stylized, repetitive, stereotyped, often but not always decorous, and they also tend to occur at special places and at times fixed by the clock, calendar, or specified circumstances.'[185] Because of ritual's performativity and invariance (people repeatedly perform formal acts and in doing so communicate their acceptance of its messages) rituals can establish, accept and sanctify understandings, rules and norms.

Tumblr's software structures people's practices and experiences in that it guides activities as scrolling, viewing, reblogging, the use of hashtags, and the creation of specific post types that exist in a specific programmed format. Users have some level of freedom for they are able to use the platform's affordances when they wish and make up the content of their own entries, but digital features restrict

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[182] Wagner, *Godwired*, 131-132. I deliberately don't refer to hashtag groups as 'networks', because Tumblr users themselves have reserved the term 'network' for something that is more community-like (i.e. involving a commitment that reveals a person's regular investment and reciprocal care for a group, including a sense of belonging, support and a collective identity). See section 4.1.2.

[183] Tumblr, "About."

[184] Rappaport, "The Obvious Aspects of Ritual," 176. Invariance emerges according to Rapaport out of (or is an aspect of) increasing formality.

[185] Ibid., 175-176.

and structure what can and/or should be done. This can be as simple as users being limited in what (combined) media they can choose for an entry or which punctuation they can and cannot use in hashtags, or Tumblr having a specific format for how an entry appears when posted. Because of such restrictions, blog posts (as collective performances) have become highly stylised and repetitive.

In addition, despite the freedom, many posts do not only have the same structure, they also are similar in content. This has led to the development of specific genres and subcultural trends (such as a minimalist aesthetic) among posts. Furthermore, although Tumblr in itself does not convey any narrative or conflicting categories, the narrative nature of media texts and fans' transformative work via blog posts does, which imbues posts with various levels of meaning—including ideological stances and values. I return to this argument in section 4.3.2, but the point I want to make here is that due to the circulation of posts and their frequent recurrence, specific meanings and orientations (interpretations, values, transformations) are repeatedly performed in a manner characterised by formality. These performances are repetitive, formalised, collective, and in many occasions symbolic, and can thus be viewed as having a ritualised element to them. As a result, they obtain the potential power to establish specific practices or what happens in these practices (i.e., the content of the post) as special, valuable or powerful. In other words, the recurrence of (largely) the same formalised entries on the platform has the ability to create and reaffirm specific orientations, values and ideologies—a formality that exists largely thanks to Tumblr's technological structure.

3.2.2 AFFECTIVE PERFORMATIVITY

Although the main function of hashtags is to organise, section 3.1.2 showed that hashtags are also used by Tumblr users in quite another way: to convey opinions, thoughts and feelings. In other words, hashtags do not only structure Tumblr, they are also used as so-called 'conversational' and 'emotional' hashtags. Whereas fannish modes of media engagement in contemporary society are often considered taboo (particularly 'feminised' fan behaviour such as obsession and emotional excess), these features of fandom are embraced and even exaggerated in Tumblr's culture of feels.[186] Stein found that visual images and GIFs are an important feature of this culture through their embodied depiction of feels. I would add that hashtags play an important role in Tumblr's affective performativity as well.

Via hashtags, feels are deliberately and collectively performed. Such performances are especially common in the run-up to a new instalment or season to a series and just after a new episode or instalment has come out. At these times especially, fans turn to Tumblr to share their opinions with others, thus participating in a form of 'just in time fandom' in which practices have become increasingly enmeshed with the rhythms of broadcasting.[187] This means that performances on Tumblr can be to some extent tied to specific circumstances. New episodes, season finales and media events surrounding franchises (such as interviews with casts at conventions) are collectively anticipated by fans, and people often turn to Tumblr directly after something aired to join in on the public expression of feels. For example, when someone watches an episode and something big happens (e.g. two characters kissing or a character dying), directly after or even during the episode (so-called live blogging) they will go on Tumblr to blog about how they feel and search on their dashboard or in the hashtags of the fandom for entries of other fans. Some will create a GIF or graphic of the scene and post it, others will simply view

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[186] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 9, 158.
[187] Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 178.

and reblog content created by others. Conversational and emotional hashtags are in both cases used to express thoughts and feelings. To give a few randomly selected examples (as there are many): '#i LOVE it'; '#I'M DYING'; '#Im literally crying watching this'; '#I – love – him – so – much'; '#this is incredible'; or '#THIS MAKES ME SO HAPPY'.

FIGURE 4. EXAMPLE OF THE PERFORMANCE OF FEELS VIA HASHTAGS.

Not only are feels performed collectively, there are also specific norms concerning *how* to express them. More specifically, affective expression is deliberately performed in a playful and exaggerated matter. For example, Amber explained:

> On Tumblr, you really tend to make the feelings you have about something bigger than they actually are. (…) It's particularly in the way you express yourself. What you think is like: "Well, I really like this" and what you say is like: "This is the best thing I have ever seen."

In addition, punctuation and capitalisation (or the deliberate lack thereof), spacing, deliberate typos, and emoticons are used in playful ways to express things like intonation and facial expression. For example, '~exciting~' indicates a tone of irony rather than actual excitement; 'ok.' has a rather irritated tone to it whereas 'ok' is neutral; 'he had to be The Hero' implies something different than 'he had to be the hero'; and '#i can't beLIEVE IT' expresses sudden excitement or shock, as if you forgot how to control your hands—as do typos and the exclamation 'ajkskjflsajd' (as if you smash your keyboard). Other developments involve the use of spaces to emphasise something (developed from restrictions within the hashtags, that have no italic options and cannot show the same hashtags twice, so you #really #r e a l l y #have to convey it otherwise) and the lack of commas (as commas separate tags and thus cannot be used as punctuation). Developments in linguistics are in other words strongly influenced by the limitations and affordances of the platform and computer-mediated communication in general. This has resulted in fans developing their own set of online linguistic rules and norms.[188] In sum, combined with the deliberate exaggerations, the performance of (normally taboo) emotional excess comes with its own rules that, once being on Tumblr for a while, you get more and more familiar with.

The deliberate, exaggerated and structured performance of feels may have important consequences, especially in occasions of just in time fandom: they can induce 'effervescence', the experience of (shared) emotion as a consequence of collective actions.[189] This means that blogging about a certain

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[188] A book on this topic by internet linguist Gretchen McCulloch is forthcoming. More information can be found on her blog: https://allthingslinguistic.com/book.

[189] Peter Berger, "Death, ritual, and effervescence," in *Ultimate ambiguities. Investigating death and liminality*,

object of fandom is not solely the *result* of feels, it also *evokes* them. For my participants, feelings enacted through collective performances on the platform could rub off on them. For example, some talked about re-experiencing specific feelings towards a media text or event due to viewing and reblogging blog entries, and others explained how their fannish feelings intensified during their online activities. Sam even mentioned having 'second-hand feelings' of sadness over the death of a young actor that he himself had only vaguely heard of, because others continuously expressed their shock and sadness. For everyone except Floortje, these kinds of feelings did not develop on every occasion and would generally disappear as soon as they left Tumblr, but they did have the capability to trigger or enhance certain moods while on Tumblr (in both positive and negative ways).

3.3 TUMBLR MOBILE

As with other social networking sites, people can download the Tumblr app that allows them to use Tumblr on mobile as well as desktop, laptop or tablet. As a result, people can take Tumblr with them wherever they go—as we have seen in chapter 2, something typical for our current engagement with screens and virtuality. This section focuses on two things that result from the existence of the Tumblr app: the mobility of screens and the difference between devices.

3.3.1 THE TUMBLR APP

My participants all used Tumblr via different devices and had the Tumblr app installed on their mobile phone. Even so, among my interviewees, the actual mobility of their use of the platform was rather limited. This has two reasons; the first has to do with the technological affordances of the Tumblr app, the second involves the places in which people feel comfortable to or prefer to use Tumblr.

First, the affordances. Tumblr's mobile app is largely similar to Tumblr on the desktop, with the existence of a dashboard, hashtags, and features that allow you to manage your blog's activity and messages. However, there are several downsides to the app. Firstly, the mobile app has less affordances than the regular website and is less user-friendly. For example, users complain about not having access to their likes; about experiencing difficulties with hashtag searches; about troubles when they upload pictures to posts; and about not being able to add or open 'read mores' (hyperlinks to long posts). In addition, XKit is not available on mobile. Therefore, it is not possible to blacklist hashtags or block advertisements. As it is important for users to tweak their dashboard settings in such a way that it fully reflects their own interests and feels like a personal place, the inability to manage these things in the app is a source of great annoyance that reduces people's enjoyment of the platform. Secondly, mobile screens generally cannot support as many pixels as for instance laptop screens can. Because the aesthetics of posts are important in specific subcultures, creators may prefer to go on Tumblr via a desktop computer or laptop. Lastly, users hardly ever use the app when they do not have access to Wi-Fi—without, Tumblr uses up too much data. Moreover, patience is required since the visual content takes a long time to load. The Tumblr mobile app, then, despite being used regularly by many people around the world, is not always loved.

eds. Peter Berger and Justin E.A. Kroesen (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 157-161.

FIGURE 5. NOT EVERYONE APPRECIATES THE MOBILE APP.

Second, users do not enter Tumblr wherever they are, not even when they have the ability to. I already mentioned that, because of the personal nature of the dashboard and the way in which it reflects an individual's specific interests, my interviewees generally prefer to or find it politer towards others to go on Tumblr when alone. As a result, for most of the interviewees (several of whom still lived at their parents) this meant that their own room was the preferred place to be to enter Tumblr. In addition, there were places they would rather *not* go on Tumblr, and these places were primarily public. This is not so much the result of affordances, but rather of the perceived risk that other people might see the (possibly 'weird') content that appears on the dashboard. The risk for NSFW content in particular ('Not Safe For Work', mostly meant as a code of warning for explicitly sexual content) is something people told me they keep in mind while for example using Tumblr when travelling via public transport. As a result, many choose to not use Tumblr at all in such places, Wi-Fi connection or no.

With regard to using Tumblr in public places, some of the interviewees described feelings of discomfort or light embarrassment. Particularly those who do not have a network of fellow fans in their daily, offline lives expressed feelings of nervousness for being judged or misunderstood by others not familiar with fandom. They therefore attempt to avoid situations in which they have to account for or explain their enjoyment of Tumblr and specific fan practices, hence keeping their fannish experiences more to themselves. In other words, despite fandom becoming more mainstream (something also noted by interviewees who have been active in fandoms for a longer period of time), the interviews indicate an ongoing awareness of (perceived) common discourses on fandom that frame it as something negative or taboo, particularly when it comes to overt obsession, emotional excess, and the practice of shipping[190]. In a similar manner, both during the participant observation and the interviews I came across remarks that reflected and reproduced views on social media as something addictive, distractive, wasteful, or even dangerous (e.g. because of catfishs). These statements, too, were often made in relation to (attempts at) restricting Tumblr to specific areas of life—something I will return to more elaborately in chapter 5.

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[190] 'Shipping' concerns the wish for a romantic relationship between characters. If you 'ship' two characters, you root for them ending up together. See also appendix A.3.

My interviewees used Tumblr via different devices and had the Tumblr app installed on their mobile phone. They also often used the platform in tandem with or as a side activity next to other activities, such as gaming, mobile messaging, watching television, doing homework, or eating alone. The choice of device, as well as the context and moment in which a device is used, in different ways shape what people do online and how they describe and understand their Tumblr activities and experiences. In that regard, devices with their 'windows into which we peer'[191] seem to function as typical frames.

The previous section mentioned how the Tumblr app via mobile screens cannot support as many pixels as for instance laptop screens can. Combined with the lack of affordances of the app, all interviewees preferred their laptop or personal computer to create their own content and customize their weblog. At such moments, people experience themselves as being 'really' or 'actively' on Tumblr. In contrast, when my interviewees use Tumblr on mobile, they often do so with the purpose to briefly check their activity and messages or to scroll through the dashboard to take a short break from what they were doing, or while also doing something else. In such instances, people describe Tumblr as a mere distraction, a side-activity, or simply a quick means to pass the time. Furthermore, mobile use and quick check-ins for many belonged to daily (social media) routines that were explained as (bad) habits, whereas 'really' going on Tumblr is something they do less regularly or only a few times per week at designated times.

I return to the topic of people's use of the platform in chapter 5, but with regard to devices one last remark has to be made. That is, different devices were not only used in different contexts, with different mindsets and different activities (such as creating your own posts) as a result; for some, the differences between devices also affect how they engage with and take in the actual content they encounter. For example, Floortje described how she sooner takes the time to read text posts when she is on her laptop. She explained:

> If I'm in front of the computer, I have the time for it, and I really sit down for it, and... well, then I can just read everything, scroll, and then I'm really Tumblring in my head as well, whereas if I'm doing it on my phone, then for me, it's much more like a quick scroll and just... waiting for someone for example and – well, more like a distraction.

Sam explained a similar experience, but between personal computer (including a broader screen and a mouse that can be handled comfortably) and other devices:

> I think that when I'm in front of the computer, I take in much more information than at a laptop for example, because the laptop scrolls more difficult and goes way slower. At the computer I take everything in a bit quicker, I get to see much more on average (...) so in that regard it's more that I acquire information more fully when in front of the computer than when I'm at a phone or a laptop.

Amber, who mostly uses her phone to go on Tumblr in throw-away moments and only uses her laptop to create her own posts, also argues:

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[191] Wagner, *Godwired*, 82.

I think that I less actively process the things I see, so to say. Because if you're actively engaged in it, you think about it. And in this case, when [*sic*] my mobile phone… especially in the mornings when I'm not really awake yet, it's more like: haha ok let's move on.

In other words, when people use larger devices with more affordances they take in what they see more thoroughly and deliberately, taking the time to read and view everything they come across.

There are two things to conclude from this. First, even though people are able to take Tumblr wherever they go, this does not mean that they actually will use Tumblr wherever they go. Technological affordances and social contexts both play an important role in this. Second, people enter Tumblr in different mindsets, and the devices they use shape how they take in the content they come across. This points toward a variety of framing activities surrounding Tumblr that will be further examined in chapters 4 and (particularly) 5.

3.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on Tumblr's material structures: its interface features and technological affordances. Specifically, it described how Tumblr functions as a blogging platform and how this shapes fan practice on Tumblr and media fans' use of Tumblr in everyday life.

Section 3.1 showed how the dashboard functions as a personal, to an extent even private home base from which a variety of (particularly visual) practices can be viewed, conducted, and participated in. Not only is it the place where users are present once they enter Tumblr, it is also where they experience the presence of others and can engage in the collective performances that are typical to weblogs in general and fan practices in particular—even though the collective authorship on Tumblr exists in tension with a discourse of professionalism that emphasises professional skill and the rights of individual artists.

Section 3.2 zoomed in on the function of hashtags on Tumblr. It explained how hashtags are essential to the development of hashtag groups and therefore to the broader sociocultural structure of Tumblr (something I will elaborate upon in the next chapter). Moreover, hashtags allow for posts to circulate fast and spread widely within hashtag groups. Combined with Tumblr's procedural rhetoric or ritualised structure, this contributes to the creation and (re)affirmation of specific posts genres, topics, ideological orientations, and (symbolic) messages. In addition to organising things, users also use hashtags to express and perform fannish affect in playful yet normative ways. This structured performance of feels not only results from fans' feelings, it also has the ability to evoke or strengthen them because of their ability to induce effervescence.

Lastly, section 3.3 focused on Tumblr's mobility and showed that despite the possibility to take Tumblr with them wherever they go, most fans are quite specific in where to enter Tumblr. Not only do technological features factor in to this (such as missing out on specific affordances), social context and existing discourses on fandom and social media also play a role in people's negotiation of where to use Tumblr. Furthermore, this section showed that people can enter Tumblr in different mindsets, explaining their Tumblr sessions differently depending on the circumstances. For some, this closely relates to the device they use to enter Tumblr on, which is something that also shapes how people take in the content and activities they come across.

These latter findings are especially important. Devices and social contexts seem to contribute to how Tumblr is described and understood. This not only shapes people's approach towards Tumblr as a whole and their feelings about being on Tumblr, it also affects the ways they approach and understand the performances that happen on Tumblr. It is these approaches towards Tumblr and fan practice that form the core topics of chapters 4 and 5.

CHAPTER 4 DIMENSIONS OF RITUAL AND PLAY: TUMBLR AS LIMINOID SPHERE

This chapter elaborates on media fans' descriptions and experiences of Tumblr. Specifically, I use this chapter to examine in what ways Tumblr can be viewed as a liminal or liminoid sphere (as theorised by anthropologist Victor Turner) and consider what this means for the practices that take place on the platform.

Whereas chapter 3 focused on Tumblr's material structures, I now start with a description of Tumblr's social and cultural structures. After describing these structures, I take them as a reference point to zoom in on how fans understand and explain Tumblr. Based on interview accounts I show that Tumblr, as a digital environment inhabited by people, is often juxtaposed against everyday reality in ways that specifically frame it as *different* from that reality, constituting a culture or world of its own. Because of this, Tumblr offers a variety of freedoms to fans that I argue are typical of liminoid (more so than liminal) spheres. This opens up the possibility to reconsider fan practice as a form of liminoid play, providing another perspective on the notion of fictional worlds as symbolic resources and fan practice as meaning-making activity.

4.1 TUMBLR'S CULTURAL AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES

4.1.1 FROM FAN CULTURE TO FANDOMS

Thanks to its hashtag system, Tumblr has developed into a multi-layered environment that houses a variety of what perhaps can best be described as cultures and subcultures. In other words, Tumblr exists of groups of people whose members behave and make sense of the digital world they inhabit in broadly similar ways, in relation to socially established structures of meaning.[192] Although fan culture has found a home on Tumblr, the platform is not exclusively the domain of fans. Tumblr describes itself as a platform that allows users to express themselves in ways that reflect who they are and what they 'love, think, and stand for' and 'where your interests connect you with your people'.[193] Consequently, interest-based hashtag groups exist surrounding a broad range of topics, such as (U.S.) politics, travel, nature, pornography, lifestyle and art. Although users can blog about different topics at once and thus participate in several hashtag groups, they distinguish between these groups and feel connected to some more than others. Tumblr's cultures are therefore rooted in the shared interests of users; the way in which users gather around specific topics results not only in digital networks of weblogs that exchange data, but also in different subcultural groups with their own sets of meanings and behaviour.

What do I mean when I refer to 'Tumblr fan culture'? Tumblr fan culture is the online culture that has developed on Tumblr from the hashtag groups that engage in fan practice. But Tumblr fan culture itself is no monolithic whole either. Rather, it can be divided into smaller groups that each form their own subculture surrounding a more specific fan interest, such as media, sports, music or celebrities. As I

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[192] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5, 89; Hall, *Representation*, 1-4.
[193] Tumblr, "Community Guidelines."; Tumblr, "About."

explained in chapter 1, the focus of this study is media fandom. This is the cultural layer that is built from blogs run by media fans: people who deeply love one or more media texts (e.g. television series, films, books, comics, games) or media culture in general, and who inspired by this love form communities and share and respond to creative work surrounding the object(s) of fandom.[194] Within the subculture of media fandom, fans have used the affordances of Tumblr to develop a specific set of cultural practices (see also appendix A). However, Tumblr's media fandom, as an overarching (sub)culture that by users is recognised as having its own cultural practices and norms, is not the only 'fandom' present on the platform.

FANDOMS: FAN CULTURE'S SOCIAL BACKBONE

Tumblr users use the term 'fandom' to indicate different fan interests and groups (e.g. 'media fandom', 'sports fandom'). More specifically, the term 'fandom' can refer to both **a)** an object of fandom (which can be something broad, like sports or media, or something narrower, like a specific media text such as a book or television series), and **b)** the group of fans surrounding an object of fandom. One of my interviewees explained for example: 'One of my fandoms is Supernatural' (meaning that she is a fan of the television series *Supernatural*), but also told me that 'the Supernatural fandom – they're kinda weird' (meaning that fans of *Supernatural* are kind of weird).

FIGURE 6. EXAMPLE OF A JOKE THAT INVOLVES THE (STEREOTYPED) REPUTATIONS OF TWO FANDOMS; *DOCTOR WHO* AND *STEVEN UNIVERSE*.

Text-specific fandoms, such as the *Supernatural* fandom, divide Tumblr's media fandom into smaller, subcultural parts, and they function as the social backbone of Tumblr fan culture. The sociocultural dimensions of fandoms revealed themselves clearly during the interviews. When asked to tell about their different fandoms, interviewees did not only compare storylines, genres and characters, but also gave detailed descriptions of differences and similarities between the groups of fans behind the different media texts. Fandoms were for example described as being involved in specific kinds of activities; as having their own inside jokes and type of humour; as having their own trends, events and

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[194] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 3-4.

traditions; as being big or small; as existing out of younger or older people; as being recent or being around for a long time (sometimes even as being 'dead', i.e. not producing any (new) content and thus being barely visible); and as having a friendly and welcoming atmosphere as opposed to fandoms in which there is a lot of controversy and conflict (referred to as 'drama'). People also talked about popular blogs within specific fandoms; about newcomers not yet aware of the fandom's norms and 'popular opinions'; and about usernames that are 'worth gold' because of their symbolic capital (e.g., the username sansastark is worth more than sansasstark, the first being the canon name and the latter being the name you were forced to use because sansastark was already taken). Furthermore, some of the larger fandoms have (stereotyped) reputations that are known to the broader fan community, which can be the subject of parody, jokes, or rivalry amongst fans (see for example figure 6, p. 54). It also occurs that fans—despite being a fan of the media text—are critical of a fandom; deliberately stay away from a fandom; or even leave a fandom because of its practices and atmosphere. All these nuances were quite well summarised by Amber, who described the subcultural nature of fandoms as follows:

> You will always notice that every fandom has its own things like – ways of interacting with each other. It is a bit harder to point out what makes it that way exactly. But I do feel as if people talk about that differently in different fandoms, that they really are somewhat their own little islands.

In other words, even though people often engage in different fandoms at once, they consciously distinguish between fandoms and view them as uniquely distinct from each other.

THE CULTURAL LAYERS OF TUMBLR MEDIA FANDOM

What types of fandom exist, and what subcultures do they constitute? First of all, it is important to clarify that the layered categories that will follow should be seen as a heuristic tool to understand Tumblr's sociocultural structure. That is not to say that the different categories are not actually there or not recognised as such (they are), but it is to say that, in practice, users are not confined to one category or another. Although many fans tend to lean towards specific subcultures with their specific kinds of activities, they can be part of several subcultural layers at once or occasionally be active in a different layer. Boundaries between the subcultural layers are in other words not strict, but they help to localise people, blogs and practices.

The focus of this study is media fandom, which is in itself a third layer, going down from the general Tumblr culture (first layer) to Tumblr fan culture (second layer). Within media fandom, there is a distinction (fourth layer) between weblogs dedicated to one fandom—often sideblogs that belong to a user or a 'network' (see also section 4.1.2)—and weblogs where users post about the whole variety of media texts they enjoy. On these so-called 'multifandom' blogs, users participate in various fandoms at once, although they can be more active in some than in others.[195]

As I focused on multifandom blogs, I found that within this fourth layer there exist two subcultures (fifth layer) that, although similar, have resulted from a difference in the produced type of content (in other words, the practices). On the one hand, there is a subculture surrounding the creation of graphics and edited GIFs. I call this Tumblr's *edit culture*. Users within this subculture, just like all the fans who are part of Tumblr media fandom, deal with analysis and close-reading, fan fiction, the use of GIFs that

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[195] Note that 'fandom' in this regard refers to (the fans of) a specific media text, such as a book, film, television series or game (e.g. the *Supernatural* fandom).

depict a scene or fragments from a scene, tag games, asks and reaction GIFs, and topicalities, memes and personal posts. However, they produce far more graphics and heavily edited GIF sets than other blogs do. Promotional activities such as blog ratings, screenshot 'promos' and Tumblr awards[196] are characteristic to edit culture and can hardly be found within the other subculture: Tumblr's *drawing culture*. Weblogs that make up drawing culture deal with analysis and close-reading, fan fiction, scene-depicting GIFs, different forms of direct interaction and real life issues too. However, they contain far less graphics and much more fan art in the form of (digital) drawings, paintings and comics. Commission work—fanwork made by artists on another user's request, sometimes in exchange for money—rather than promo activity is the norm within this subculture. Figure 7 shows an overview of the described subcultural layers.
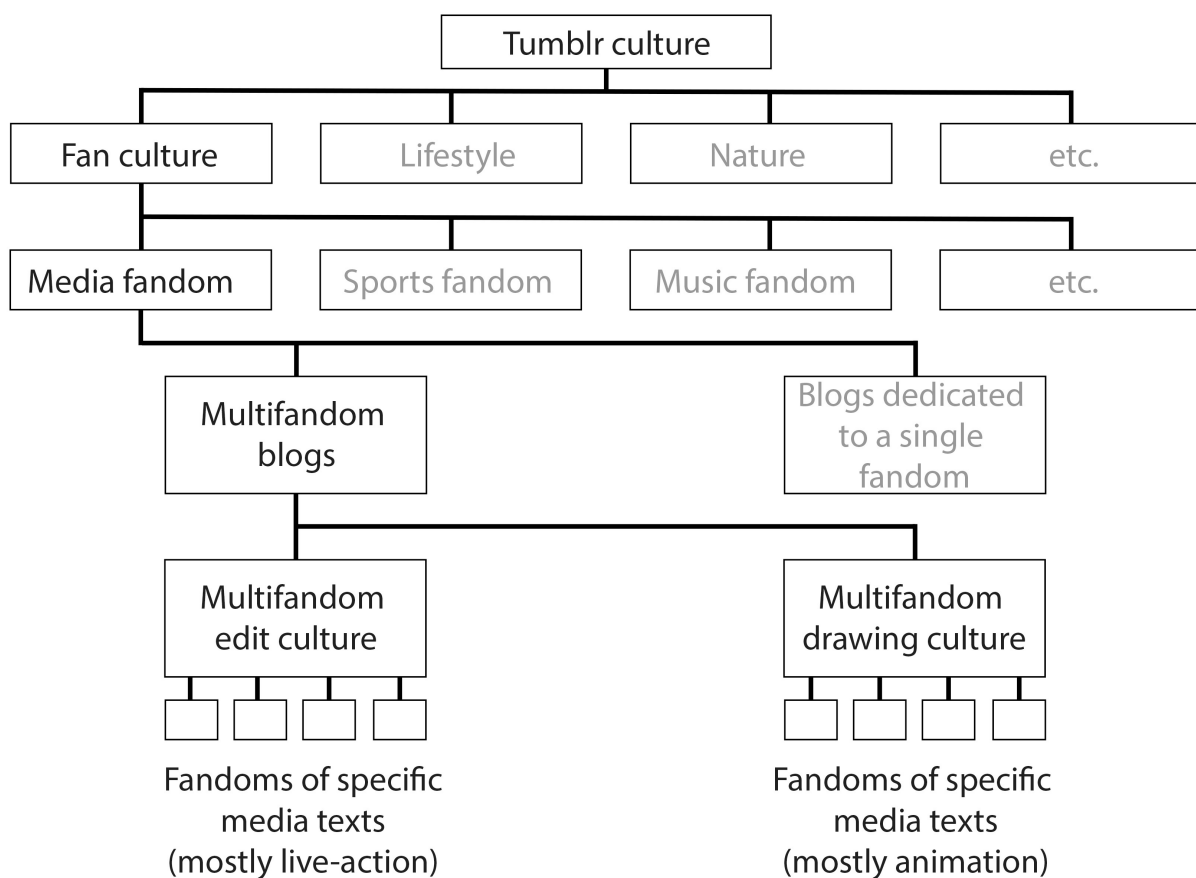
FIGURE 7. OVERVIEW OF TUMBLR CULTURE AND ITS (SUB)CULTURAL LAYERS.

There is a pattern in which type of fandoms are part of which subculture. Within Tumblr's edit culture, fandoms of live-action media franchises (i.e., live-action television series and (book-based) films) are most prevalent. Thus, you find a lot of graphics of series like *Star Wars*, *Doctor Who*, *Sherlock*, *Game of Thrones*, *Supergirl*, *Supernatural*, *The 100*, etcetera. Comedy show fandoms are an exception in this regard, because they use GIFs almost only to depict iconic, amusing or moving scenes (thus without much editing). Within Tumblr's drawing culture, we primarily find fandoms related to Western and/or Japanese animation and comics (i.e., anime and manga), such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender/Legend of Korra*, *Voltron: Legendary Defender*, *Miraculous Ladybug*, *Steven Universe*, and many different anime

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[196] For an extensive description of these 'promo activities' (which are meant to attract more followers), see appendix A.7.

like *Haikyuu!!*, *Tokyo Ghoul*, *Yuri!!! on Ice*, and films from Studio Ghibli. Fandoms of books and games are present within both subcultures, although it depends on the specific book or game and personal interests of fans if more attention goes to graphics and edited GIFs or to fan art. For example, in the *Harry Potter* fandom, there are users who are part of edit culture and post many graphics of *Harry Potter* and hardly any fan art, but there are also users who are part of drawing culture and post a lot of fan art of *Harry Potter* and hardly any graphics.

Although fans have the liberty to produce both graphics and drawings about the same media text (as the *Harry Potter* fandom proves), in my fieldwork and during the interviews it became clear that individual fans often tend to lean towards either the edit culture or the drawing culture. Amber for example explained how she, despite being a big fan of the series, is not very involved in the *Game of Thrones* fandom. During her interview, she explained to me that she enjoys fandom because it offers an extension of the fictional universe. She pointed out how fandoms such as the ones of *Star Wars* and *Game of Thrones* produce much more edited GIFs, whereas fans of anime draw more. She then argued:

> For me it depends a lot on how much I like the source material, but it is partly also like, what the fandom is producing now, what is talked about amongst each other. For example, Game of Thrones, I have the feeling that – for the past seven years, I've always been in the fandom, but it has never been in a very intense way. And I think that if I had more interaction with the fandom or if I had found what was produced by the fandom more interesting than I actually do, I would have been more into it. On the other hand, for example for Yuri on Ice I'm very interested in what the fandom is doing, so there I *am* very active.

In other words, fans prefer specific practices, and the practices of a fandom can for some serve as a reason to be less involved in said fandom, no matter their feelings for the media text itself. For Amber, this means that she prefers Tumblr's drawing culture (even though she does not create drawings herself), and steers away from Tumblr's edit culture.

Despite the existence of both an edit and a drawing culture, users themselves primarily use text-specific fandoms to organise themselves. The fact that many fans describe their weblog as a 'multifandom blog' is for example a strong indicator of this. Furthermore, the importance of fandoms to Tumblr's social structure becomes clear when we turn to the blog descriptions that users can post on the homepage of their weblog or on their 'about'-page. Although you can stay completely anonymous on Tumblr, most users reveal at least some personal information about themselves in this description, such as their first name or nickname, age and country of residence. Typical within Tumblr media fandom is also that many users state their pronouns and sexuality, and use (fictional) classifiers such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator[197] or the Hogwarts houses (from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, widely known amongst users[198]) to convey information about who they are. More important, however, is a user's description of what kind of content visitors can expect to find on the blog via a short list of their main fandoms. In publishing this, fans place themselves (deliberately or not) within one or more of Tumblr's (sub)cultural layers. Thus, to state on your blog that it is 'multifandom', that you are 'anime trash', or that you are

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[197] The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is an instrument from the field of psychology that reveals sixteen personality types based on preferences within four dichotomies (Extraversion-Introversion, Sensing-Intuition, Thinking-Feeling, Judging-Perceiving). Over the last few years, the MBTI has become a popular online test among Tumblr users (among others) to identify themselves. See for instance www.16personalities.com.

[198] Some of my participants referred to *Harry Potter* as a 'gateway fandom': the fandom through which most people came into contact with fan culture in general and/or Tumblr in particular.

'into Mass Effect | Star Wars | Overwatch' tells visitors something about the (type or variety of) fandoms in which you are active. The same goes for usernames, which are often based on character names, quotes, or references to objects and places from one or more media texts. These references make it easy for fans to locate both themselves and others within the broader Tumblr fan culture and seek each other out based on shared interests.

4.1.2 TO SHARE AND TO SUPPORT: NETWORKS, FRIENDSHIPS AND COMMUNITY

In chapter 3, I described hashtag groups, collective performances, and users' awareness of other people's presence. These elements all indicate the existence of 'networks' on Tumblr, which Rachel Wagner (based on the work of sociologist Fortunata Piselli) defines as groups of people who are in (online) contact with each another—even if they may not all interact with or know one another—and that contain the possibility to cultivate actual communities. These communities can develop from a sense of belonging, reciprocal care, a collective identity, and people's commitment to and (regular) investment in the group.[199]

The social networking aspect of Tumblr turned out to be essential to my participants' experience of the platform. For four of my interviewees, Tumblr is first and foremost a place where one can interact with other people who enjoy the same things or who are 'just as extreme' in their love for media texts. For Benthe, Tumblr gives her the feeling that she is part of a group. Isa also said that Tumblr provides her with 'a sort of community in which you can all – well, not all, but where you can talk with a certain number of people about the same topics.' Floortje spoke affectionately about her 'Tumblr buddies', referred to other Tumblr users as 'people like me', and explained that 'even if it would turn out to be a scary old guy that I am talking to, then at least it would be a scary old guy who likes the same things as I do.' Lynn explained that she enjoys sharing her opinions on new shows with other people, loves to exchange new ideas and possible scenarios, and is thankful that Tumblr allows her to talk with the readers of her fanfics. I also found many references to friendships between fans, both during fieldwork and in the interviews. Many of these friendships begin almost coincidently, for example when two people find out they both love the same character or when a creator receives a compliment from someone. The friendships often have a global character, with people living in different countries and time zones and many nightly chats as a result. In some occasions, people even meet each other offline or send each other packages over post. In other words, Tumblr facilitates a variety of interactions between fans, it can create strong ties between individuals, and it can give people a sense of belonging.

It is perhaps to no surprise, then, that the interactions between people can develop into more than networks with lingering possibilities. Apart from the development of intimate friendships and a general sense of belonging, fandoms have for some become a source of social comfort and support. Floortje and Benthe, who both felt that they had no one in their daily lives to share their love for television series with, found a strong sense of support and belonging in blogging and chatting about their fannish experiences. Both said that it was a relief to find out that obsessive behaviour is 'normal on Tumblr' and were glad to see they were 'not the only one' to feel strongly about something. Benthe explained: 'If you for example have seen a film that really, like, appealed to you emotionally or something, or if a character dies, then sometimes you need support. Reblogging GIFs or something like that, or talking about it (...) … that you talk about it like: oh, that happened, and then the other person says: yes, oh my

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[199] Wagner, *Godwired*, 131-132.

god! You know, like that.' Floortje described a similar experience and told me about a specific occasion when talking to other Tumblr users provided comfort to her:

> I had, for example with the Glee fandom, at a certain moment one of the main characters died in real life [Cory Monteith, who played Finn Hudson in the series - WW] and then it was really nice to have people that also wanted to talk about it, and that – back then I found it really nice to have that, because back then, well… I didn't expect it myself, but I was actually really very shocked, and I really had to cry about it and I was – I was like shocked also, more at my own reaction, how strong it was, and I didn't have the idea that people in my daily life were also able to talk about it well. And that's why at that moment, I found it really nice to have the fandom with whom you could talk very well and where everyone gets it.

For both Floortje and Benthe, Tumblr is the place to go to in order to find not just an emotional outlet for their fannishness, but also support and a place to be among fellow fans—an opportunity they find lacking in their everyday lives.

People also explicitly seek out fellow fans and build intimate connections within the larger fandoms of media texts. One of the ways to do this is through 'networks' (not to confuse with Wagner's definition of a network): groups of users that together run a weblog as a sideblog to their personal blog. Networks are generally created surrounding a specific topic or subfandom and are particularly common within Tumblr's edit culture. Networks have their own chat group (often via another app like Cik or WhatsApp) in which users can promote their fanworks, give advice on each other's work, discuss their fandoms and also find support with regard to real life events and experiences. One participant, who I will refer to as Co-lloportus, described it as 'a more social form of blogging'. Co-lloportus is part of different networks, including one dedicated to the female characters from the *Harry Potter* series. This network serves as a 'positive space to talk about and celebrate them.' However, the interactions within networks are not confined to fan practice. Co-lloportus explained that her networks allow her to get to know people from all around the world with whom she can exchange advice and encouragement:

> … sometimes we'll give each other advice, or talk about things like mental health and relationships, because the age range of the groups can be quite large (I think one I'm in has a range of 13 to 30ish) the topic can vary depending who's online. Older members will also often give advice to younger people, it's a great way of sharing life experiences. We also give a lot of moral support say if someone has an exam they're stressed about, recently I've been auditioning to drama schools and I've been receiving a lot of support from my friends in networks.

As this explanation shows, networks are not only spaces where you can geek out together and develop your skill as a fan artist, they also provide a way for users to actively develop friendships and find support in times of personal hardship. Co-lloportus' description furthermore reveals the kind of transgression of binaries Louisa Stein wrote about with regard to fandom, as networks include a variety of people that normally may not interact with each other (for example because of a difference in age or nationality). Furthermore, as networks share a weblog together, they carry out a collective identity within the broader fandom, especially when the network uses their own name as a hashtag to promote and/or collect blog entries—similar to how fandoms can develop their own identity and reputation within the broader Tumblr fan culture. Combine all this with the fact that my interviewees attested to frequent and regular check-ins with their networks, and the conclusion can be drawn that networks (and to a

lesser extent hashtag groups) can develop into communities that have commitment, a sense of belonging, reciprocal support, and a shared group identity at their hearts.

4.2 A PLACE APART

4.2.1 DESCRIPTIONS OF OTHERWORLDLINESS

One of the reasons I have been able to describe the variety of characteristics that make up Tumblr fan culture (fandoms in particular) is because participants described them to me as such in the interviews. This means that these fans had a rather clear understanding of the cultural organisation of fandoms. How does this relate to their understanding of Tumblr as a whole?

Sam began his explanation of Tumblr with the words: 'the culture on Tumblr is a bit like…'. Benthe added to her description of fan practices that 'Tumblr has very weird humour'—something Sam noted as well in exactly the same manner—and she referred to Tumblr-specific terms by noting that 'that's what people always call it over there.' Isa talked about the specific 'Tumblr style' of graphics, and Lynn told me about what 'Tumblr' likes and enjoys (as in the sentence: 'Tumblr likes references to other media and strong female characters'). These remarks show that my participants understood Tumblr as a culture or entity of its own.

Logically, the notion of Tumblr as entity is grounded in the specificity of its fan culture. However, it has also developed from people explicitly juxtaposing Tumblr against everyday life. Floortje's accounts reflected this juxtaposition the strongest as she repeatedly talked about how she found a place for her own fannishness on Tumblr:

> It's just so *completely different from your own – than your normal life*. (…) I always liked series a lot and everyone knew that, but they did not know *how* much I liked it, you know, and how much I watched it and stuff like that. And that was always nice, that – *on Tumblr that was just normal* and everyone – I really enjoyed it, that that was there.
>
> (…)
>
> I find it quite nice that it's still… *something that belongs to yourself, not to the rest of your environment*. (…) I just really enjoy having my own place where I can, well, talk with like-minded people. (…) I just, yeah, there was a moment when I just accepted that in *my own world*, okay, over there I'm quite extreme in this, apparently, so then I go seek it on Tumblr. [emphases added]

In these accounts, Floortje clearly distinguishes 'normal life' and 'her own world' from the virtual place that is Tumblr. Later in the interview, she also explicitly referred to Tumblr as a different 'world' when describing a Skype call between her mother and her online friends as an occasion on which 'worlds intermingled'.

Attributing a quality of 'otherworldliness' to Tumblr was something that occurred most frequently in the accounts of those for whom Tumblr was their first contact with fandom and who did not have the ability to share their fannishness with (offline) friends or family. Even when they have formed close relationships or met people offline or over video chat, Tumblr is primarily talked about as something *different*, its otherness being an important part of Tumblr's attraction or personal importance. Having

said that, similar references to dimensions of otherworldliness were expressed (albeit less explicitly) by all my interviewees. Isa repeatedly contrasted her Tumblr experiences against an everyday life dominated by stressful student life. In this context, she explained Tumblr as a means to get her mind off school, 'just viewing what people have made, and then I don't have to think about *the stress world* around me.' Sam, in his interview, immediately started out describing Tumblr as 'a very special situation' that is different than all other social media platforms, because 'it *doesn't concern daily life*, it is more an expression of creativity (…) a kind of mix between Facebook and art websites.' Similarly, Amber mentioned that she and her friends never talk over Tumblr when it concerns something serious, noting that 'if we have anything important or serious to discuss, we go to WhatsApp or Facebook or something like that, *to real life*. That still exists as well.'

In conclusion, the fans I interviewed explain Tumblr as a culture or world of its own. Tumblr's specific sociocultural structures seem to contribute to this experience, as does the presence of fandom in people's everyday lives via channels other than Tumblr (i.e., Tumblr is less 'other' when fandom is more integrated into people's other (social) environments). Even so, all interviewees juxtapose Tumblr against **a)** everyday life and **b)** social media platforms that are perceived as being closer to everyday life. This means that Tumblr closely resembles the typical definition of a magic circle: a marked-off sphere of activity (Tumblr is different from 'normal' life) with a particular disposition (Tumblr has a specific culture with its own normative structures) that you can enter and (temporarily) 'be' in.

4.2.2 THE FREEDOM 'FROM'

The previous section showed that Tumblr is described as different from everyday life—as a different world or a place apart. How can this understanding of Tumblr be characterised? Although the interviewees' descriptions of Tumblr varied in some regards (some emphasised content and creativity, others stressed social interactions), they all had one thing in common: everyone associated Tumblr with a sense of freedom. The freedom people talked about can be divided into two types: a freedom *from* and a freedom *to*. I analyse the latter type of freedom in section 4.3, as it largely stems from the first. Therefore, let's first take a look at what Tumblr provides freedom from.

The juxtaposition between Tumblr and everyday life in all interview accounts takes a specific form that already shines through in Isa's remarks about Tumblr being a way to get her mind off of the 'stress world' of daily student life. That is, Tumblr is not just viewed as different from everyday life, it is specifically different from the work and obligations prominent in that everyday life. For example, after her remark about escaping the 'stress world' of daily life, Isa explained that she goes on Tumblr to 'get relaxation out of it'. She said:

> The end of the week, that's like, I don't know, then you have like – then you get school out of your head for a moment and then there's more time. (…) I do the most on my blog in terms of, of customisation on a Friday or in the holidays, anyway.

Sam stated something similar when he said: 'Once I'm out of bed, I put [Tumblr] away and then I actually let it be until I've got a moment of free time again, for example at the end of the afternoon or something, or in the evening. (…) It's just a type of leisure, in that you can just dive into what you yourself enjoy. (…) I only have to scroll and every now and then I click on a picture, so in that regard it's very relaxing.' Lynn said almost the same thing about scrolling through her dash:

It gives me a calm feeling, I find it relaxing to view things on Tumblr, what people think… just viewing images, reading comics. (…) In the evenings, after dinner, I just crash down on my bed and watch some anime and scroll through Tumblr, I just let my mind go blank and relax. In the evenings it's calm and I don't have to do stuff anymore, I don't have to stand up to grab something or to cook or to tidy up, I don't have to do schoolwork anymore, so I can just do this at ease.

Amber noted as well that 'for me, it is something I use to wind down for a moment and not be very active with something else. I therefore think that those [at the beginning and end of the day] are the moments that I'm most active in something like this.' As these accounts show, Tumblr is strongly associated with free time and relaxation as opposed to obligations like school tasks, household chores, part-time jobs, and other types of work people have to deal with in daily life. In this context, my interviewees also repeatedly talked about humour on Tumblr, about posts that made them laugh, about inside jokes you share as a fandom, about fanworks that made them feel happy, and about how Tumblr can help to get your mind off of things and unwind (sometimes as a form of escapism). This means that, for my interviewees, the 'freedom from' that Tumblr provides closely relates to experiences of joy and satisfaction—emotions my interviewees tried to maintain by choosing carefully who to follow and what hashtags to blacklist, filtering out unwanted content.

Thus, Tumblr provides freedom from work that comes with experiences of relaxation and enjoyment. In addition to the freedom from obligations, however, the interviews also revealed a certain level of freedom from social expectations (a characteristic perhaps more unique to Tumblr). Section 4.2.1 mentioned how Amber described Facebook and WhatsApp as applications closely connected to real life, whereas Tumblr was perceived as something different. Amber elaborated on this experience as follows:

On Facebook, you really tend to only show the positive things, and Tumblr – it can sometimes be a little bit negative in that regard, Tumblr, the whole way in which you present yourself. But it also gives a certain freedom to share the things you're insecure about. Let's say that, if you think, like: well, I'm afraid for this that this will happen, or I'm afraid that I can't do this, then I would sooner post it on Tumblr than on Facebook, and that is partly because of the fact that I there present myself, not to friends and family, but to the friends closest to me and complete strangers, so then it doesn't really matter how I – then it has rather little consequence, how you present yourself over there.

In other words, Tumblr's nature as a platform more detached from daily life and those in it, results in a freedom to share things about yourself you normally would not, at least not on social media. Something similar could be found in Lynn's descriptions of how fans on Tumblr (and fandom in general) pulled her through rough times. For her, the physical distance and fandom setting Tumblr provides made it easier to talk about personal topics that are important to her right away:

You build friendships over something that you actually wouldn't know about someone. For example, I watch this show and then I meet someone who also watches this show and who likes the same character, and then you can talk for hours with someone about one character and then it actually begins the other way around, because you talk about all these important things first, like: yes, I've been through this and I live like this and that, and then you have things like: you have a dog?! Those little things only come about later in the friendship.

One way to explain these accounts is to regard them as moments where people feel free to share things precisely because they are free from normal expectations. They can drop the fronts they would otherwise put on for fellow students, family members or colleagues, they can share other dimensions of themselves, and they do not have to adhere to social conventions concerning day-to-day conversations or meetings with strangers. As a result, it can be easier to talk about personal things to strangers that do not know you and hold no expectations of you—something also known as the passing stranger-effect.[200]

What to conclude from this? Tumblr, as a place apart, is able to do what Rachel Wagner theorised all magic circles can do, i.e. allowing people to temporarily step outside life's rules and escape daily life and personal hardships, to feel immersed in the world before them and forget the world outside. The experienced freedom from obligations and expectations reveals that Tumblr provides a sphere that is experienced as non-work and that is contrasted with everyday grind and social roles. In short, people's descriptions of Tumblr reveal a distinction between work and leisure in which Tumblr is categorised as the latter.

The fact that Tumblr is set apart from normative structures of everyday life has an important consequence. The 'otherworldliness' of virtual worlds has by Wagner been dubbed a liminal quality: when the virtual world is seen as a place apart, both the log-in procedures needed to enter said world and the virtual world itself can be viewed as thresholds, 'betwixt and between' established social structures and expectations. Moreover, a levelling process may take place that creates a communitas of people who are free to do things they otherwise would or could not.[201] However, if we look at Turner's own considerations concerning liminality—especially in light of his theorisation of the liminoid—it seems more accurate to describe Tumblr as a *liminoid* sphere rather than a liminal one.

According to Turner, liminality is inherently part of a ritual structure of separation, transition (the liminal phase) and incorporation that follows natural rhythms and cycles. As a result, liminality is mostly functional to normative structures: people are betwixt and between during the (largely) unstructured phase of transition, but ultimately return from this phase in a transformed state that adheres to the existing status quo.[202] Furthermore, Turner sees liminality as obligatory for the community as a whole—an obligation that involves (sacred) ritual work and serious play, that is close to central processes, and that often invokes a sense of fear and dread. In contrast, the liminoid is completely detached from work, it may not have any utilitarian or ideological purpose, and is associated with pleasure and enjoyment. It takes place apart from central processes, which allows for a freedom from institutional, familial or civic obligations. People are therefore also not obligated to participate in liminoid activities, nor do these activities follow cyclical patterns—they happen continuously in leisure time and space.[203]

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[200] Zick Rubin, "Disclosing Oneself to a Stranger: Reciprocity and Its Limits," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 11(3): 233-260.
[201] Wagner, *Godwired*, 154.
[202] This does not mean that the liminal cannot inspire change—on the contrary, the cultural creativity that liminality allows may explain why cultures (or cultural aspects) change. Even so, Turner does note that liminal phenomena are integrated into the total social process rather than existing at the margins (like liminoid phenomena), ultimately contributing to the working of the social structure (whereas liminoid phenomena are freer and can therefore be more critical or even revolutionary). Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 54.
[203] Ibid., 54-55.

Wagner rightfully points out that the liminal stage of a rite of passage is different than the 'liminal' spaces of virtual worlds, mostly because we constantly move back and forth between virtual worlds and our daily lives. Her concept of 'persistent liminality'[204], that describes a consistently present and/or on-demand ambiguous experience of 'hovering' between worlds or states of being, offers one solution; I would argue that using the concept of the liminoid would be another. Moreover, the concept of the liminoid neatly covers several aspects of people's Tumblr experience that the liminal does not. Firstly, viewing Tumblr as a liminoid sphere would account for the ways in which it is associated with leisure time and space (and the relaxation and enjoyment that flows from it). Secondly, it would acknowledge the voluntary nature of online activities. Thirdly, it would encapsulate Tumblr's continuous and on-demand presence without having to refer to terms that pull the concept of liminality from its ritual structure.

In addition, there is another important difference between the liminal and the liminoid, one I have not yet mentioned but that again makes it seem more accurate to describe Tumblr as a limin*oid* sphere. Because the liminoid is set apart from central processes, Turner argues that the level of freedom within liminoid settings is greater than in liminal phases. That is, the higher level of freedom *from* that exists in the liminoid gives people an even larger freedom *to* engage in critical and idiosyncratic forms of creative "liminal" play—play that furthermore can be traced back to specific individuals or groups rather than being the product of a largely uniform or anonymous communitas. This is what I will turn to now: the freedom to play and offer alternative models to what is, enabled by the freedom from normative structures that Tumblr as a liminoid sphere provides.

4.3 ON THE THRESHOLD: EXPLORING (OTHER) WORLDS

4.3.1 MEDIA FANDOM AND THE FREEDOM TO PLAY

As I wrote at the beginning of the previous section, all my interviewees associated Tumblr with a sense of freedom that can be divided into a freedom *from* and a freedom *to.* According to Turner, liminal and liminoid spheres give people—temporarily free from the normative structures and social roles of everyday life—the freedom to speculate within certain limits about their own culture. This speculation takes the form of playful behaviour in which people can inverse, blur or recombine familiar cultural elements in ways that bring a different perspective about.[205] Especially in liminoid settings, which are more independent from central processes than liminal ones, this speculation can become subversive and critical towards the status quo and can involve idiosyncratic tendencies as specific individuals and groups receive attention.[206] Turner calls this playful speculation the 'subjunctive' of culture: a cultural mode focused on potentiality and possibility or a world of what-if.[207] As we saw in the previous section, fans definitely experience this freedom from on Tumblr. And this makes sense: Tumblr is a place that is not only set apart from central processes (work) of everyday life, it is also involved with a cultural practice (fandom) that even *within* the leisure setting of culture has been regarded as something of the

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[204] Wagner, *Godwired*, 89.
[205] Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 26-27.
[206] Ibid., 54.
[207] Ibid., 82-83.

margins.[208] But does Tumblr, 'betwixt and between' as it is, also create a space where people are free to engage in playful, perhaps critical behaviour towards their own culture?

In the section *From liminal to liminoid* (2.2.3), I mentioned how our engagement in the worlds of our favourite media can be related to the cultural significance of the liminoid: as we enter and generate new worlds of entertainment, we presumably engage in a (reflexive) performance of meaning—something that according to Turner is typical of liminoidity's ritual-like function.[209] My interviewees explicitly talked about how Tumblr enabled them to be free to pursue their own interests, explore media texts in whatever way they like, and blog about whatever they wish to blog about. In particular, they stressed that Tumblr gives them the ability to engage more intensely with their favourite media texts and read, view and create extensions of fictional universes through their fan practice. Tumblr is therefore a space that makes it possible to leave everyday reality behind and step into a sphere where you, through fan practice, can freely explore (elements from) the worlds of your favourite media texts.

What do such explorations look like? Transformative works on Tumblr (such as close-readings, headcanons, AUs, fan fiction, fan art, and edits—see appendix A for explanations and examples) form an ever-changing and on-going elaboration on the fictional worlds of media texts and their already existing (transformative) extensions. Louisa Stein argued that transformative work uses already existing media but 'adds something new, with a further purpose or different character, altering the [source] with new expression, meaning, or message.'[210] On Tumblr, fans do precisely this. They for example zoom in on a specific symbolic element from a series and explore the meaning behind it; they combine elements from a series in such a way that it emphasises something new or stresses a particular message or a particular character, development or event; they rethink and recreate an existing text in a different setting or imagine different events or different interactions between characters; they alter the events or identities depicted in the source text through their own art or writings; they embody places and scenes that have not yet been brought to life visually in their graphics, edits or drawings; and so on.

There are several things noteworthy about the transformative practices on Tumblr. Firstly, the process of remix means that existing media (or elements of it) are re-presented through performative blog posts. As Stein also found, this performance often takes the form of deconstruction and rearrangement of elements from the source text, which can be just for fun or out of love for a source text but can also involve dissatisfaction or critical engagement with a text. [211] Because of this process of remix, transformative work is precisely the kind of cultural creativity Turner described in the context liminoid (and liminal) spheres. Transformative work plays with cultural elements (media texts themselves and what is presented in them) in ways that involve recombination, destruction and reconstruction, which can result in different perspectives on the source text and (consequently) the world in which we live— sometimes unsettlingly so, like when people explore themes that go against the message of a text or that are considered taboo (such as extreme violence, mental or physical abuse or sexual assault). This kind of speculative play and the possibility to perform taboos is typical of the liminoid/liminal.

Secondly, the play that occurs on Tumblr asks for a more nuanced definition of play than Wagner provides in her work on virtual reality, ritual and play. For Wagner, play is closely connected to

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[208] See also note 36 (p. 16) of this thesis.
[209] Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 37.
[210] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 131.
[211] Ibid., 66.

interactivity and rules: i.e., she views play as the freedom of movement in between the rules. However, there are other, more nuanced conceptualisations of play. One of these stems from anthropologist Don Handelman. He provides a theory that, in contrast to Wagner's rather limited 'gameplay', distinguishes between rule-bound games and more changeable, playful types of play. These more disruptive types of play involve greater freedom and open up to a multiplicity of possibility—comparable to what happens when other perspectives are explored in transformative fanwork. Handelman argues that play can create alternative realities and relies on our capacity to deal with multiple realities (i.e., several classifications of reality) at once.[212] He furthermore perceives play as something that depends on easily changeable 'foundations-for-form': organic models that through imagination can be altered and turned into something else while retaining similarities to their foundation.[213] He gives the example of two sisters who agreed to 'play sisters', which establishes a play frame ('this is play, not real', i.e. an alternative reality) that allows them to explore and experience their sisterhood (the foundation-for-form) with difference. According to Handelman, this process not only offers players a sense of release, freedom and exhilaration (comparable to my interviewees' accounts of feeling relaxed or relatively happy while being on Tumblr), it also—once again—involves a degree of destruction and recreation as it takes apart and repositions the boundaries that categorise phenomena.[214] Moreover, foundations-for-form can easily change again and again (you can play sisters, then mother and daughter, then teacher and pupil, etcetera). Because play can disrupt mundane reality and suddenly open up other possibilities *within* that reality (something Handelman, like Turner, refers to with the subjunctive), Handelman argues that play is particularly suitable to comment on existing orders and send messages back to players as they return to the reality of non-play—the sisters may carry messages from their play-experience back into their real relationship as sisters, for example.[215]

When fans perform transformative work, they rely on foundations-for-form located in both the source text and real life, such as locations, objects, cosmologies, societal structures, characters, relationships, events, and experiences. While playing with these existing categories, they are able to alter meanings and create alternative perspectives and possibilities. Although this process is not totally free in that the foundations have to remain recognisable for the play to have meaning or make sense (e.g., it is often disliked if characters behave 'out of character' in fanwork), the level of freedom and, consequently, multiplicity in this form of play seems extensive. Fans (as textual poachers) bring their own experiences, desires and wishes into their fan practice and read, explore, and alter the source text accordingly all the time, both individually and communally.[216] The combinations that can be made are therefore (in theory) endless. Fan scholars, among whom Stein, have pointed out that this means that transformative work breaks down the notion of one coherently authored text and emphasises the many latent possibilities that reside in a media text.[217] This, too, is characteristic to both the play Handelman conceptualises and Turner's liminoid, which can create and store a 'multiplicity for alternative models for living'.[218] The fact

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[212] Don Handelman, "Play, Anthropology of," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, eds. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Amsterdam/New York: Elsevier, 2001), 11504.

[213] Ibid., 11505.

[214] Idem.

[215] Ibid., 11504.

[216] Within fan studies, transformative work has become generally associated with the concept of textual poaching, a term coined by Henry Jenkins. He explained fan practices as tactics (in the sense of sociologist Michel de Certeau's (1984) everyday 'tactics', as opposed to structural, repressive strategies) that allows fans to craft a discursive space for themselves and dubbed this process 'textual poaching'. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.

[217] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 133.

[218] Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 33.

that the alternatives created via transformative work stem from both fannish affect *and* criticism (despite, or perhaps because of, people's simultaneous affect for the source text) is characteristic to liminoidity as well, as the relatively greater freedom and general lack of restrictions gives it the independency to go against existing structures. Furthermore, individual creators get more attention in liminoidity (in contrast to the anonymity of liminality), which is consistent with fans' individual freedom to blog about whatever they like and the growing presence of a discourse of professionalism on Tumblr that concentrates on the skills of individual fan artists (as described in section 3.1.2).

Lastly, the fact that transformative play relies on foundations-for-form derived from both source texts and real life reveals something essential to Tumblr as a liminoid sphere. As a threshold, Tumblr exists betwixt and between the rules, structures and expectations of everyday life. Wagner pointed out that with regard to virtual worlds, this threshold constitutes a hovering between the normative structures of the real world before and after log-in, the virtual world being a liminal space. With regard to Tumblr, however, another possibility opens up. Not only do people play with cultural elements from the real world, they also play with elements from the fictional worlds of the media texts. This means that Tumblr's liminoid sphere not only constitutes a threshold between everyday reality and Tumblr's virtual reality, but also between people's lived reality and the 'fictional reality' of the media texts. In other words, Tumblr is betwixt and between the rules of everyday life, but also betwixt and between the rules and 'facts' of media texts, which allows fans to play with elements from both worlds in whatever way they can imagine. In that regard, Tumblr allows people to go back to and (re-)enter their favourite fictional universes again and again, from a liminoid sphere that gives them the freedom to shape these universes to their own liking through transformative practice.

4.3.2 THE PERFORMANCE OF MEANING AND CREATION OF VALUES

There is one theme that has already revealed itself at several places throughout the last chapters and that I want to elaborate upon in this last section of chapter 4: the topic of meaning. Turner argues that liminoid spheres have cultural significance because they are the settings where norm-conflicts and structural contradictions can be narrated and relived through performance. In his view (largely based on the work of the nineteenth-century philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey), performance 'draws forth' or 'squeezes out' meaning from experience, the latter being about living through something and thinking back on it.[219] The cultural performances in liminoid spheres are therefore able to give meaning to events and experiences and resolve conflict. With this in mind, it makes sense that Wagner talks about virtual experiences in relation to meaning-making, that Handelman speaks of commentary on social orders and carrying messages back via play, and that Stein argues that fan practice informs people's lived experience and that alternative models have become directed outward into everyday reality.[220] People make meaning from the things they encounter around them, be that daily events and experiences, media texts, or the fan practices on Tumblr. Presumably, this affects their lived reality.

Chapter 5 delves extensively into the interrelations between Tumblr fan culture and everyday reality, but before doing so, it seems important to first establish what place cultural and symbolic meanings

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[219] Specifically, Turner draws from Dilthey's concept of *Lebensphilosophie* to explain experience as something that is complete once you 'perform it in an act of creative retrospection in which "meaning" is ascribed to events and parts of the experiences—even when that is that is "there is no meaning".' Ibid., 12, 18.
[220] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 175-176.

have on the platform. As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, fan practices on Tumblr provide insight into how these fans interpret the media they encounter. However, through their interpretations, fans also extent and elaborate the media texts, thus altering and contributing to their meanings in fluid ways that are characterised by multiplicity. Many of the posts are in that regard a type of performance in which people think back on (and sometimes re-experience) aspects of media texts in ways that result in the production of meaning. Fictional characters in particular function in this regard as a kind of key symbol.[221] As we saw in for example Lynn's description of how talking about her favourite characters helped her to deal with real life events and experience (section 4.2.2), characters can be (and often are) used by people to reflect upon issues they encounter in their daily lives. Playing with elements of media texts and the real world can therefore be a meaningful practice that goes beyond interpretation and decoding—it can delve into personally important topics that enables people to think back on and live through events.

Meaning-making in fandom can get quite ideological. In chapter 3 we already saw how the procedural rhetoric or ritualised structure of the platform (blog posts in particular) can contribute to the creation of values. That is, the recurrence of similar posts across the platform establishes specific orientations shaped by both the form and meaning fans put into the content, as well as Tumblr's software that guides what the content can look like and how it spreads. As such, the formal structure, the symbolic messages and the normative stances posts might carry can obtain through their recurrence the power to establish specific values or ideologies. Now that we have arrived at the topic of meaning, let's clarify this argument by means of an example: the development of 'fanon'.

Fanon can be described as the interpretations of and ideas surrounding (elements of) the source text that are absent in the actual 'canon' material, but that nevertheless are accepted as 'true' by the majority of fans. As a result, fanon is broadly used in fanwork, which in turn enhances its status as fanon. Specific ships between characters can for example become fanon, or it can be fanon that a character has a specific personality, sexuality or ethnicity. For example, Hermione Granger (from the *Harry Potter* series) is canonically described as an ordinary looking girl with bushy brown hair, brown eyes and rather long front teeth. Taking this description as a rule, fans have taken the freedom to fill in the narrative gaps in such a way as to imagine Hermione as a black girl (see for example figures 8 and 9, p. 69). Not only does this idea stay true to the description of Hermione from the source text, it also deliberately plays with the symbolic meaning of Hermione's marginalised status as a muggleborn (a witch from a non-wizarding family) within the magical community and mirrors it against her marginalised position as a black woman in the reality of our own western society. Moreover, Hermione's depiction as a woman of colour is deeply connected to contemporary discussions about the need for more diverse representation in western media, a sentiment that (as we will see in chapter 5) is particularly prevalent on Tumblr.[222]

Although not everyone necessarily agrees or follows up on the depiction of Hermione as black, the structured, stylised recurrence of her as a woman of colour in blog posts (through fanworks such as fan

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[221] Sherry B. Ortner, "On Key Symbols," *American Anthropologist* 75(5) (1973): 1339-1340. The character of Hermione would in this case be an elaborating symbol, used by fans to work through and make sense of certain societal structures, ideas, experiences, and feelings.
[222] Interestingly, the same thing seems to be happening to Harry Potter himself; fan depictions of him being from mixed or Indian descent were becoming increasingly common during my time of research and may, perhaps, become fanon in time as well.

art and edits) has largely established the fanon of Hermione being black. The initial idea spread via Tumblr's technological and visual structures and as such has been taken up by more and more creators, with the result that the majority fanworks I came across during fieldwork depicted or described Hermione as black.[223] This is not just an aesthetic choice: the symbolic and ideological meaning behind black Hermione play an important role, which becomes especially clear in the critical comments and accusations of whitewashing some fan artists have received after depicting Hermione as white while having the choice not to. In other words, the example of black Hermione shows how the ritualised performance of ideological viewpoints via blog posts can create a specific set of norms and values regarding specific topics (in this case ethnic diversity in media) within Tumblr fan culture—one that repeatedly reinforces itself as long as it keeps being performed.
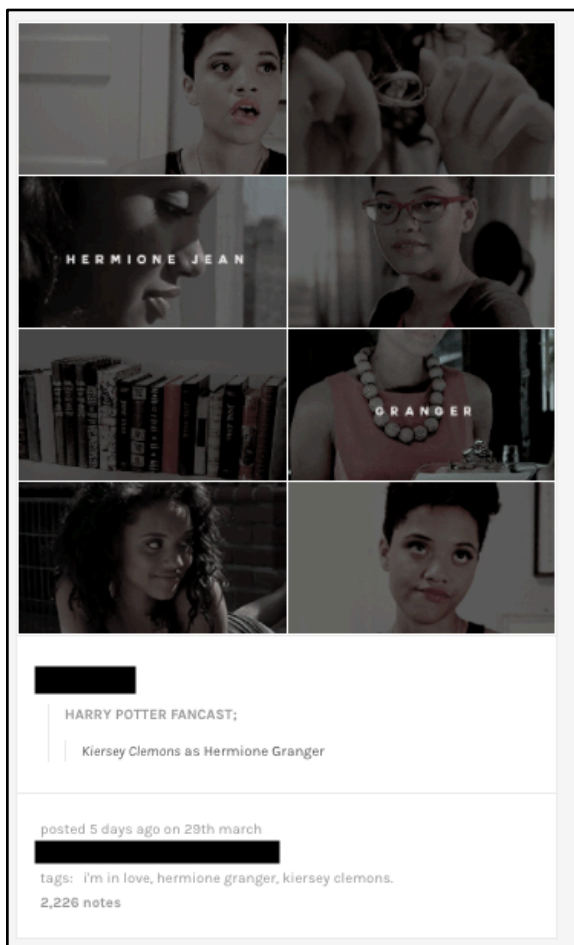
FIGURE 8. FANCAST EDIT IN WHICH HERMIONE IS RE-IMAGINED AS WOMAN OF COLOUR.

FIGURE 9. HERMIONE AS WOMAN OF COLOUR IN FAN ART.

In conclusion, it seems that Tumblr fan culture has been developing its own norms and values, particularly with regard to what fandom and media should represent. In this context, some readings have become more common and more commonly accepted than others—a power dynamic that according to ritual scholar Catherine Bell is inherent to ritualisation.[224] This also became clear during the interviews: as soon as people mentioned the freedom to explore media texts in any way you wish or

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[223] Exceptions are edits and (edited) GIFs based on the film series, which often make use of the canon film material for their transformative work—material in which Hermione (played by Emma Watson) is white.

[224] Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 43, 74.

blog about whatever you want, they also began to talk about the ways in which this freedom has been limited, sometimes increasingly so. These seem to be the limits Turner refers when he talks about liminal initiands who are 'within certain limits' free to speculate about their own culture—or it may be that structure has started to find its way into the in principle free space of Tumblr. As the next chapter will show, this is not without consequences.

4.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I elaborated upon media fans' descriptions and experiences of Tumblr. I examined the ways in which these descriptions reveal Tumblr to be a liminal or liminoid sphere and considered what this tells us about the practices that take place on the platform. In the first two sections, I described the cultural and social structures of Tumblr (4.1) and showed that these contribute to people's understanding of Tumblr as something that is different from everyday life and other social media—a culture or world of its own (4.2).

Examining my interviewees' descriptions of otherworldliness up close, I found that Tumblr is specifically viewed as different from the obligations and daily grind of everyday life. As a result, it is understood as a place free from institutional, civic, and familial obligations and social norms and expectations— something associated with leisure, relaxation and enjoyment. This led me to reconsider Wagner's notion of virtual worlds as liminal spaces, arguing that another possible way to describe Tumblr is as a limin*oid* sphere. Looking at Tumblr from the perspective of liminoidity, rather than liminality, is more in line with Victor Turner's own theories on the concepts. It accounts for the ways in which entering the otherworldly freedom of Tumblr is a voluntary act that can be performed at any moment, in expectation of enjoyment, and with no direct utilitarian or ideological purpose. In other words, it accurately explains Tumblr as a betwixt and between sphere detached from the ritual structure of rites of passage.

According to Turner, the freedom *from* normative structures that liminoid spheres provide, gives people the freedom *to* speculate about their own culture. Section 4.3.1 examined the ways in which transformative fan practices on Tumblr can be explained as liminoid play: a speculative type of play that deconstructs and recombines cultural elements in any number of ways. The high levels of freedom in this play, its often critical nature, the multiplicity of possibility it generates, and the role of individual innovators are all characteristic to the liminoid. Moreover, the play on Tumblr uses cultural elements or 'foundations-for-form' (a concept theorised by Don Handelman) that have their basis in both the fictional worlds of media texts and the real world. As such, Tumblr forms not just a threshold between real life before and after log-in and real life and the virtual world, but also—most importantly—between people's lived reality and fictional worlds.

Lastly, in section 4.3.2, I delved deeper into the role of meaning-making in fan practice, showing how the procedural rhetoric or ritualised structures of Tumblr contribute to the creation of norms and values within Tumblr fan culture. It is this development of structure that paves the way for what chapter 5 will further explore: the tension between Tumblr as a liminoid sphere of unrestrained play and Tumblr as a place for normative, structured practice that is closely intertwined with people's lived realities.

CHAPTER 5 DYNAMIC FRAMINGS AND THE NAVIGATION BETWEEN REALITIES

Chapter 4 discussed how Tumblr is described and experienced by the participants of this study, focusing on Tumblr's relationship to everyday life and the types of freedom this provides. However, the findings of chapter 4 raise two questions. Firstly, if Tumblr is understood as a place apart, does this mean there are no relations to everyday life whatsoever? Secondly, if there is freedom on the platform but this freedom exists in tension with normative practices, how can this tension be explained?

The upcoming chapter takes scholarly findings about the 'streaming' or 'messy' nature of the relationship between the on- and offline (as theorised by Rachel Wagner, Celia Pearce, T.L. Tylor and others) as a starting point to further examine how fans view the relation between Tumblr and their everyday life, specifically with regard to how the notion of Tumblr as 'other' comes about. Inspired by ritual theory on how people negotiate different realities (most notably the work of Terhi Utriainen), chapter 5.1 explores the role of framings in how media fans use, and subsequently come to understand end experience Tumblr from everyday contexts. Although Tumblr's virtual reality constantly runs the risk of spilling over into other spheres of people's life, I argue that rather than this resulting in a persistent 'hovering between worlds', people deliberately aim to set Tumblr apart from everyday social realities through dynamic framing practices. This allows them to sensitively navigate between virtual and non-virtual reality.

Chapter 5.2 proceeds exploring how fans negotiate the relationship between Tumblr and other social realities, now zooming in on the narratives people create about fandom and fiction. Specifically, I consider how Rachel Wagner's concept of the ritual-game-story thing can help us to understand the tension between unrestricted liminoid play and restrictive norms that limit this freedom to play. I show that fans are able to key in and out of different framings with regard to Tumblr—framings that interlace and that reveal themselves most clearly at moments where the freedom to play restrictive norms clash. The different perspectives that result from the framings are closely related to Tumblr's liminoidity and its perceived relationship to real life, and they affect how fans make sense of fan practice and fictional (transformative) work on the platform.

I conclude the chapter with several preliminary thoughts on the relationship between the findings of chapters 5.1 and 5.2, discussing how the various perceptions of fan practice might be shaped by the everyday contexts from which fans use Tumblr.

5.1 FRAMING TUMBLR DYNAMICALLY

5.1.1 TUMBLR'S STREAMING NATURE

In section 2.2.3 (*Persistent liminality*), we saw how Wagner and other game scholars argue that the relationship between online and offline reality is messy, fluid and constantly under negotiation. Wagner therefore proposes to approach virtual reality not as a closed-off magic circle, but as streaming, i.e. as spilling over into our everyday lives and vice versa. She argues that the "magic circle" (she uses

quotation marks for this) of a virtual world is crossed anytime it 'has meaning for our daily lives' and points out that 'virtual spaces generally can and do affect us after we turn off our screens.'[225] As a result, our relationship to virtual reality is one of 'persistent liminality', a term Wagner uses to describe the 'on-demand and consistently ambiguous experience of liminality' that is characterised by the ambiguities of virtuality and real life (among other things). [226] Specifically, Wagner argues (citing sociologist Sherry Turkle) how continuously being plugged in via mobile devices erodes 'helpful lines in the sand' that aid us in separating different spheres of life, resulting in a persistent 'hovering' between worlds.[227] These theories make sense. We often do multiple things at once when it concerns screens: we play games on our phones while at work, we switch between work documents and social media, we message with friends while at dinner at our parents, we answer work-related emails while having an evening out, and so on.

Is there a similar dynamic at work with regard to Tumblr? Apart from the fact that references to the offline world can be found on the platform (most notably in how fans play with cultural elements, see also section 4.3), one of the most important indications that Tumblr indeed has a streaming nature is that my interviewees all talked about the attraction that Tumblr holds for them. Affordances such as notifications, likes and reblogs create a strong temptation to check Tumblr throughout the day. The same goes for the persistent influx of new content that makes it feel rewarding to enter your dashboard repeatedly within a short period of time and therefore makes it hard to stay away. Floortje told me for example:

> I'm not allowed to leave a window open because then I will go on Tumblr again anyway. (…) It's really stupid – it's really, it's pure distraction (…) You know, you are happily Tumblring but meanwhile you're thinking: oh, I should really be studying… okay I'll go study soon, just these two posts… and so I go on and on. Well, that's not entirely okay. (…) It sucks, like: god, I really should be studying now, come on.

Floortje tries to make sure she closes down Tumblr when she needs to study—a rule she specifically attempts to adhere to when staying over at her parents. But even though she only allows herself to use Tumblr during breaks, she does not always succeed. Sam's recollections were similar. He explained that being on Tumblr while also doing homework meant that 'it's always with a lot of guilt that I constantly keep scrolling' and that he preferred being on Tumblr when he did not have anything else to do and could 'just be on there, without any negative feelings.' Consequently, he does not use Tumblr when he has deadlines because he feels the risk is too high: once on Tumblr, chances are he will stay there for longer than he wants to, as it can be hard to pull your attention away 'when you want to know what will show up next.' Moreover, Sam recalled nightly Tumblr sessions (something Benthe and Lynn also did), describing for example how the evening before the interview 'it suddenly became three o'clock in the morning. Without noticing, you've just suddenly wasted two hours on Tumblr just by scrolling, whereas you should actually be asleep.' Benthe struggled with Tumblr's attraction as well. She described a period of time when she gained a lot of followers and recalls how this made her 'almost addicted' to Tumblr: she was continuously checking her blog activity and Tumblr became a kind of habit that she could not keep away from. Moreover, she put so many hours into creating entries and preparing her queue that Tumblr began to feel like work or a chore. As a result, Tumblr became 'less fun' and it was only after a

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[225] Wagner, *Godwired*, 4.
[226] Ibid., 89.
[227] Idem.

long break from the platform, caused by her temporarily living elsewhere, that Benthe got some of her initial enjoyment back.

The above examples reveal that Tumblr is not only streaming in how cultural elements from everyday life are explored on the platform, but also in that Tumblr indeed has the ability to cut across different spheres of life—it is always only a few clicks or finger touches away. People therefore struggle with the possibility of being constantly 'plugged in' and the ways in which this blurs demarcations between different spheres of life such as free time, school, or family obligations. However, this is not where the story ends. Section 3.3 showed how the devices people choose to go on Tumblr can shape what people say they are doing and affect the way they take in content. Section 4.2 explained that people understand Tumblr as a leisure activity associated with feelings of relaxation and enjoyment. Moreover, Tumblr is experienced as a place apart, free from daily obligations and expectations. These findings show that although there certainly are elements that are indicative of the streaming nature of virtuality, not everything is as persistently blurred as it seems. After all, despite its streaming nature, Tumblr is still understood as a place that is different from everyday life. Moreover, something the above accounts also point toward is that people do *not* live in a perpetual state of ambiguity, betwixt and between virtual and non-virtual reality. Instead, they have taken it upon themselves to (attempt to) negotiate Tumblr's streaming nature. This is what the next section will further explain, building in part on the interview accounts above.

5.1.2 DRAWING LINES IN THE SAND

Why is it that Tumblr in spite of its streaming nature is viewed as 'other' than everyday life? Section 4.2.1 mentioned that Tumblr's specific sociocultural structures and the (lack of) presence of fandom in people's daily lives via channels other than Tumblr contribute at least in part to this otherness. But there is also another reason why Tumblr is experienced as a world apart—and this is where Terhi Utriainen's notion of dynamic framings proves helpful. As explained in section 2.3.1, frames and how they are keyed tell us what is going on and guide our experience. Framings can take different forms: they can be spatial or temporal, or they can involve special sounds, language or clothing.[228]

The interviews and observations revealed that temporal and sometimes spatial framings for an important part establish Tumblr's otherness. My interviewees all used Tumblr on a daily basis, although the number of times someone visits Tumblr and the intensity of the visits could differ per day and change over time. However, despite checking their Tumblr activity and dashboard at different intervals throughout the day, they described the late afternoons, evenings and/or weekends as their preferred moments to (in some cases 'actually' or 'more actively') spent time on Tumblr. This has resulted in a rhythm that revealed itself clearly during my time participating on the platform: activity spiked during the evenings and weekends and interviewees explained that their networks where noticeably busier during for instance school holidays. Moreover, people named their own homes and bedrooms (see also section 3.3), and some even more specific places like their bed or the couch, as their typical and/or preferred places to go on Tumblr.

Tumblr being understood as leisure activity is therefore no coincidence: it is an understanding shaped by the times and places in which fans most often go on Tumblr. And even these are no coincidence, as

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[228] Utriainen, "Ritually Framing Enchantment," 48.

they function as temporal and spatial markers created by the fans themselves. In the interview accounts described in the previous section, we see how Floortje and Sam both talk about rules they set up for themselves in order to make sure that Tumblr stays confined to times of leisure and not risk their schoolwork. Similarly, Amber noted how she does not enter Tumblr when she sits at her desk because it is a space reserved for 'actively working on something', whereas mornings and evenings allow her 'to scroll without necessarily feeling guilty.' Isa also spoke about how she has drawn up rules for herself that designate specific times of day to either her studies or to Tumblr and other leisure activities, explaining: 'I just don't like it when I'm doing something to relax when I actually don't have the time for it or if it's actually inconvenient.' She also mentioned that she puts her laptop away when visiting relatives—a sentiment I also found in Floortje's account and, in a slightly different form, in people's remarks about not entering Tumblr in public spaces or in the presence of people who do not have a Tumblr account themselves. With regard to other people's presence, people specifically kept in mind if these other people were familiar with fandom and/or Tumblr or would misunderstand or look down upon fannish activities, choosing to leave Tumblr be when they suspected the latter. They also referred to social conventions surrounding social media use when in the company of others (for example, some liked to use Tumblr while eating dinner or breakfast, but only did so when eating alone).

In sum, my interviewees use boundary markers or 'framings' when it concerns Tumblr. These framings reveal two things. Firstly, it shows that even though Tumblr's streaming nature carries the potential to constitute a persistent betwixt-and-between state of being, it is nevertheless (or maybe it is precisely because of that potential) deliberately negotiated by Tumblr users, even if the actual level of success of the negotiation is not always the same. Screens themselves may thus function as a kind of framing (think for example of Wagner's argument about log-in procedures constituting some kind of ritual preparation for entering another reality[229]), but it is particularly the ways in which people *use* the screens—at designated times, or at specific locations—that shape people's understanding of Tumblr as something 'other' than everyday reality.

Secondly, people's framings depend to a large extent on the (perceived) discourse surrounding fandom and social media. In his work on the liminoid, Victor Turner briefly notes that distinctions between work and non-work have led to a notion of work being of value and (unorganised) play being 'time wasted' or something in which we 'indulge'.[230] A similar understanding clearly shapes my interviewees' descriptions, use, and experience of Tumblr. Fans' consideration of other people's opinions on fandom and online interaction before they choose to log on in their presence, and the fact that fans tend to 'abstain' from the platform in times reserved for work, both reveal an internalisation or at least awareness of dominant discourses on social media use and excessive (feminised) fan behaviour (as described by Louisa Stein).[231] In addition, this internalisation/awareness revealed itself in the ways interviewees explained certain fan practices and their own behaviour in the interviews. For example, some interviewees laughed apologetically before explaining to me what 'ship wars' are or what a running gag in the fandom entailed. Furthermore, when talking about occasions when they failed to adhere to their own rules (hence going on Tumblr in places or at times reserved for work), my interviewees described their Tumblr activity as 'a waste' or as 'stupid' and explained how the otherwise relaxing, enjoyable activity turns into one plagued by feelings of guilt and/or restlessness. Such

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[229] Wagner, *Godwired*, 82-83, 153.
[230] Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 39. Turner relates this specifically to a Protestant ethic, which although not as prominent as it once was, can still be seen as characteristic to Dutch culture.
[231] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 9.

sentiments can also be found on Tumblr more broadly, where fans half-jokingly talk about Tumblr as a 'bad habit' or a 'dumb hellscape' (see for example figure 10).

FIGURE 10. TUMBLR DESCRIBED AS 'BAD HABIT'.

From the negative understandings results that the enjoyment so important to people's Tumblr experience (see also section 4.2.2) becomes threatened once the lines in the sand begin to blur. My interviewees emphasised throughout the interviews the importance of enjoyment, humour, and relaxation: Tumblr, as Amber put it simply, is 'something I must enjoy.' At times of leisure, participants felt they could truly enjoy Tumblr without having to worry about anything else. However, entering Tumblr in times and social settings designated to other activities results in a wholly different experience—one where Tumblr is a distraction above all else, something that interferes with other settings of life and therefore poses a risk instead of an enriching experience. As a result, being able to use boundary markers effectively becomes essential. It enables fans to keep the reality of Tumblr (an environment where interaction with strangers and excessive fannish behaviour is fully accepted) and other social realities apart when they feel the need to protect them from each other; productivity and social credibility from Tumblr, and Tumblr's enriching enjoyment from daily obligations and expectations.

In short, people's deliberate use of framings reveals sensitive negotiations between Tumblr and everyday life that take into consideration time, place, and social context. As such, these negotiations seem closer to the kind of dynamic framing Utriainen describes in her work on angel practitioners than to the persistent 'hovering' Wagner conceptualised. Utriainen describes how angel practitioners depending on the context welcome an experience of angels as 'real' or keep it at bay, experiencing angels as mere imagination. They do so in order to not risk the secular reality they share with others and to uphold their own social credibility (to others) as well as the credibility of the (life-enriching) angels (to themselves).[232] In other words, they are able to key in and out of ritual reality when the situation asks for it, which enables them to successfully engage in both. Utriainen therefore argues that framing is a skill—one that can be learned and applied within everyday contexts, even when the actual skill level between practitioners may vary. Moreover, she shows that framing does not necessarily involve clear boundary markers and can instead be an 'imperceptible, delicate and smooth operation that is intimately and complexly interlaced with non-ritual reality.'[233]

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[232] Utriainen, "Ritually Framing Enchantment," 56.
[233] Utriainen, "Lived Religion," forthcoming.

If we compare the dynamic nature of these framings with the ways in which people navigate between the virtual reality of Tumblr and the reality of their everyday lives, we see a similar kind of subtle framing and sensitive navigation. Just like angel healing and meditation practices can be marked by creating a relaxed place and mood (e.g. via lighting a candle or playing music in the background), so too do fans mark their relaxing, 'actual' Tumblr sessions by designating them to specific times and places in ways that are sometimes subtle and undiscernible to outsiders (like when someone allows themselves a break in between two study sessions). I.e., the markers enable fans to engage in the virtual reality with a specific (more positive) understanding of being on Tumblr.[234] Furthermore, comparable to how social context and other people's acceptance of the existence of angels shapes the boundary work of angel practitioners, social contexts and people's understanding of fandom and online interaction shape how fans frame Tumblr's virtual reality. Settings of work, the presence of others, public spaces; they all trigger a reflexivity that makes fans frame Tumblring as silly, a bit embarrassing perhaps, or downright as waste of time. In short, this means that the fans I interviewed carry their own boundary markers with them to dynamically and skilfully navigate between realities, which enables them to enter Tumblr without possible risks. In other words, when the lines in the sand become blurred, people tend to draw their own.

5.2 PERCEPTIONS OF FAN PRACTICE AND FICTION

5.2.1 'DRAMA' AS A STARTING POINT

The two previous sections used the concept of dynamic framings to examine how people negotiate between the virtual reality of Tumblr and everyday life contexts. In the coming sections, I also focus on framings and the relationship between virtual worlds and real life (as perceived by fans), but rather than focusing on how Tumblr as a platform is used and experienced, I zoom in on fans' perceptions of fan practice and fiction on the platform—perceptions that, as I will show, are fundamental to the tension between the freedom to play and restrictive norms. As mentioned at the ending of chapter 4, there exists a tension on Tumblr between the unrestricted freedom to explore media texts in any way you want and restrictions to that freedom grounded in normative structure. According to Victor Turner, the 'intrusion of normative social structure' into a in principle free (liminal or liminoid) region of culture is quite a common occurrence; the limitation of freedom within the liminoid sphere that is Tumblr therefore does not come to much of a surprise.[235] Even so, in order to better understand the tension that arises from this limitation, I propose to examine people's narratives about fan practice on Tumblr by means of Rachel Wagner's notion of the ritual-game-story thing. To be more precise, I argue that this concept can help to explain the different perceptions multifandom bloggers have of fan practice (and by extension, fiction)—perceptions which I believe are fundamental to the tension and reveal themselves most clearly in moments when tension is greatest: i.e., in moments of drama.

Fans use the term 'drama' to refer to conflicts between (groups of) fans. Although I did not explicitly ask people about drama, my interviewees all spent quite some time talking about their experiences with and opinions about it, and on several occasions during the fieldwork I encountered drama. As a result,

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[234] Utriainen, "Ritually Framing Enchantment," 48.
[235] Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 28-29.

drama is a particularly helpful starting point from which to analyse people's ideas on what fan practice and fiction is about.

The drama I encountered and was told about revolves around three different issues: the discourse of professionalism, producer-fan relations, and the content of fanworks. First, drama surrounding the discourse of professionalism. As explained in section 3.1.2, a 'discourse of professionalism' has found its way onto Tumblr—a finding first made by Louisa Stein.[236] Via the discourse of professionalism, the skill and rights of individual fan creators become foregrounded, which regularly clashes with the collective, ever-changing nature of transformative work. In other words, drama surrounding the discourse of professionalism revolves around fans' perceived right to distribute and transform fanwork and the often implicit rules set up (also by fans) to preserve original fanworks and the artist's message behind it. For example, practices like reposting and deleting captions are considered rude or theft and can lead to heated arguments between (especially) artists and presumed thieves.

Second, drama that involves producer-fan relations. This does not directly involve arguments between fans; instead, it is about fan criticism towards source texts and hence the producers of these texts. Stein argues that transformative work can result from dissatisfaction and critical engagement with a text, both in terms of fannish affect (e.g. fans love a character and disagree with its negative depiction) and in terms of aesthetic and ideological disagreement (e.g. fans are unhappy with an aesthetic choice or with the values upheld by a narrative).[237] On Tumblr, this may for example take the form of text posts that express disappointment or resentment at a scene or an episode (which might develop into analytic essays), users can create their own depictions and narratives that 'fix' the problem or show an alternative, or fans can unite to stage a protest.[238] Floortje told me for instance about an occasion where fans of the crime series *Castle* boycotted the show after the news that two female actors (among whom the lead actress, Stana Katic) would not return for the new season due to budget cuts.[239] Although this kind of drama is rooted in the relation between fans and the source text and/or its producers, it can also result in conflicts between fans—for example when others disagree with the criticism and choose the side of the producers.

Third, the drama surrounding the content of fanworks. This type of drama is most strongly related to the tension between freedom and restrictive norms as discussed in section 4.3. It does not necessarily revolve around source texts themselves (although the canon material often plays an important role in the discussions that result from initial conflicts) but rather involves disagreement and critical engagement with fanworks. For example, when a fan artist receives critical comments of other fans in which they are accused of whitewashing a character, the criticism is voiced directly against the content of the fanwork. Other forms of drama surrounding fanworks concern disagreements about which characters should end up in a relationship together (resulting in so-called 'ship wars') or arguments about why a character should (not) be loved. Thus, similar to how source texts can be engaged with critically, disagreements surrounding fanworks also have their origin in fannish affect, aesthetic choices or the values that fanworks uphold.

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[236] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 159-160.

[237] Ibid., 66.

[238] Fan protests can become powerful forces, presumably aided by an effervescence that develops from the collective performances on the platform.

[239] Michael Isidore, "*Castle* Cancelled After 8 Seasons," published May 12, 2016, accessed June 8, 2018, http://tvline.com/2016/05/12/castle-cancelled-season-9-beckett-stana-katic/.

As fans' perceptions of Tumblr fan practice reveal themselves most clearly in moments of drama, it is first necessary to take a closer look at this. Therefore, let's consider some examples in detail.

Lynn told me for instance about someone in a specific anime fandom who often instigates drama within the fandom. In the specific case Lynn described, this person argued against the popularity of two characters who are presented as bullies in the series. As part of her argument, she described her own experience with being bullied and pointed out that when people simply forgive the characters for their misdoings, it is as if her own bullies have been forgiven as well. This statement developed into a heated argument between fans, as opponents argued that their love for the characters is not meant as a personal attack and not about her personal experience, but rather about the story itself and the fascinating background of the characters.

During the period of field work I noticed similar debates within other fandoms. For example, one of my participants active in the *Voltron: Legendary Defender* fandom actively engaged in the fandom's drama. The arguments she was involved in during the time of research were mostly about issues of representation, and ships. For example, she argued against the popularity of the character Lotor, son of antagonist Zarkon, the emperor to an intergalactic empire ruled by an alien race responsible for conquering and colonising planets:

FIGURE 11. CONFLICT SURROUNDING THE (EXCITEMENT OVER) CHARACTER LOTOR FROM *VOLTRON: LEGENDARY DEFENDER*.

As this entry shows, just like the person Lynn talked about, my participant strongly argued against 'romanticising' or 'glorifying' a character because of morally ambiguous or wrong behaviour. Figure 11 also depicts a reblogged post that shows how the drama develops, as someone with the same opinion

reacts in another entry to people who replied to them to stop 'ruining the fun' with their criticism. Another argument in the *Voltron* fandom that developed over the course of my fieldwork period concerned a ship that my participant deemed deeply problematic, as it involves an adult character (25 years old) and a minor (late teens). During this so-called 'ship war', shippers of this ship and its 'antis' (those specifically against the ship) got into a conflict over whether or not the ship would condone or even promote paedophilia. The anti-shippers dismissed the ship as 'gross', abusive and/or offensive, whereas the shippers argued against this by denying the ages or (more often) pointing out that responses from antis were unnecessarily harsh as it concerns fictional characters. The latter argument was something I encountered often. One example is the post in figure 12, that argues that 'real human lives matter more than fictional characters.' In a similar sentiment, Benthe told me how ship wars often make her think that people should 'get a life' and Floortje noted that although she understands why people can be angry and disappointed over something and has felt that way herself, it's still 'a bit excessive' because 'it's just a show.'

FIGURE 12. 'REAL HUMAN LIVES' ARE DISTINGUISHED FROM 'FICTIONAL CHARACTERS'.

Ship wars were also brought up by others. Amber recalled the fierce ship wars within the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* fandom, noting that 'there were quite some big arguments about who should actually get a relationship with Katara [one of the female main characters] in the end.' She explains in this regard how ships are now critically assessed by fans with real life situations in mind:

> I think that a lot of people nowadays really feel like… which relationship you would view as most healthy in real life. But I think it also has a lot to do with which characters' interaction you find most interesting, so it's… but that's a difference I've noticed between old and new fandom, in new fandom it is also a lot about if two characters in real life would also work well together, and in the past it was still a lot more like: I find this interaction interesting, but I don't think that they necessarily would be together in a retirement home in eighty years, so to say.

For Amber, the assessment of ships based on criteria you would use for real life relationships limits the freedom she has as a fan to explore interactions that interest her. And she was not the only one who felt that way. Lynn gave a strongly similar account (note here also the argument of fictionality I mentioned earlier):

When someone does something bad, people react very violently, whereas it can also just be interesting to think about why that character would do something bad. At first… it was in fact – on Tumblr, in the past, you could nicely… also like bad characters and make analyses of it, but now they've become a bit more judgemental over the years and go like: "Well, how *could* he, he is really bad. People who like him are also bad!" Whereas that just makes no sense. (…) It's a fictional character, and if you like him – you can choose for yourself if you like him or not. And it's also just interesting to consider: what moved someone to do something like that, or to become like that? It's just like *Criminal Minds*, like – there they also show why a bad person became that way and stuff, right? And in some shows they don't show why someone became like that, and then I like to imagine: what could he have experienced to become that way, what are the underlying thoughts of the character, or what would the writer have meant when he made it turn out this way? (…) Sometimes people really send each other heavy threats like: "How can you like *them* more than *them*!" Whereas it's really just about a series. About people who actually just don't exist. But people find it extremely important that *these* two get together instead of those other two.

Amber and Lynn, who have been active in fandom since their early teens, both talked about how they experienced increased limitations to the freedom to explore universes, scenarios and character interactions through blogging. Instead of being able to blog about anything they want, they feel it is wise to consider the reactions of other fans, and they are able to do so to the extent that they can predict what kind of opinions would raise arguments.

The calculated restraint with regard to what to post I found among other interviewees as well, who as soon as they talked about the freedom on Tumblr explained how this freedom is not without limits. They mentioned specific topics that work as catalysers for drama, described 'popular opinions' and pointed out that in order to keep out of trouble, they keep some opinions to themselves. An example is the topic of representation. Section 4.3.2 already showed how representations of Hermione as a woman of colour in the *Harry Potter* fandom have become common and can result in the critique of whitewashing. Similar issues were brought up by nearly all of my interviewees. For example, Amber talked about extreme reactions of fans concerning the representation of gay couples. Benthe explained how people feel strongly affected by issues of racism and described how this often results in arguments between those who defend the writers and those who criticise them.[240]

For my interviewees, the debates and conflicts that resulted from them were things they continuously had to manage in order to protect their own mood and enjoyment (something previous sections showed is important to them). Benthe explained that she does not…

… want too much to do with that, because it's like bad for, well, your own emotions and mood and… well. Sometimes you can get really drawn into that. Especially when for example a character dies or something happens that is a bit problematic, which is something that's often said on Tumblr, it can have quite a lot of influence and impact or something.

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[240] Note that the Dutch background of my interviewees also plays a role in how they talked about these topics: the public debate about racism, for example, is prominent in the United States, but it exists in quite another way in the Netherlands.

Isa noted that although she understands why people can feel disappointed, it irks her that people keep complaining and she wonders why they do not just stop watching the show. Sam and Floortje both told me how critical fan practices have helped them to develop a more critical gaze towards media, which they describe as both important and regrettable. Floortje explained that criticism of fans can 'really ruin the image you have of a series. (…) I think that on the one hand, Tumblr in that regard can enrich your experience of a series, but – well, it has also ruined it somewhat, perhaps. And well, that feels a bit… double.' Sam noted that:

> I'm really like: yes, but just let me enjoy my media without it having to leave a bad taste in my mouth. But in some cases, I feel like: yes, but they're right, there *is* something wrong with it. Something like: you don't have to be happy with that. So mostly I just search for the middle ground, like: okay, I know there are problems, but even so, I still enjoy the thing that is given here.

These accounts reveal that fans continuously work on ways to deal with the drama in order to protect their own enjoyment. They mostly do this via blacklisting specific weblogs or hashtags in order keep a distance from the 'negativity in some fandoms' (as Benthe called it), but for some it also means completely moving away from a fandom. Despite such measures, however, it seems to remain difficult to completely find your way around the drama.[241]

The examples described above all have something important in common: they involve values and are related to the real world, often in intricate ways. Source texts themselves, their transformative elaborations and extensions, ships, and objects of fannish affect seem to become increasingly assessed based on moral, social and political values grounded in people's lived reality. It is these values (that may or may not be the offline norm) that limit the freedom to play, especially when they are part of the normative structures that have developed within Tumblr fan culture. For example, drama surrounding issues of representation is grounded in (an awareness or experience of) the marginalised position of and discrimination against many people of colour and LGBTQ+ people in Western societies—and it is often these people, who feel unrepresented and marginalised in (American) media and society, who argue passionately *for* representation and *against* specific narrative and creative choices in source texts and fanworks. For them, Tumblr's liminoid sphere and the transformative work they can perform in it provide an opportunity to carve out a space for themselves in the contemporary media landscape, exploring possibilities that would remain invisible otherwise. Using fanworks as a form of 'social justice', fan practice becomes a tactical performance, able to present alternative perspectives that can be projected onto real life. To imagine such alternatives is in other words more than a purely imaginative act—it reflects a wish for actual change (e.g. with regard to societal structures and the kind of source texts produced within them). At the same time, acts that align with existing (offline) normative structures that are found harmful are criticised, as they too are no mere imaginative acts. Rather, they are viewed as contributing to an oppressive status quo.[242]

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[241] For this reason, interviewees noted that fandoms that already have low levels of drama are generally 'more relaxed' or 'really chill'.

[242] These points of view strongly reflect current American public debates, many of which are centred around issues of racism, discrimination and marginalisation.

Interestingly though, the counterargument to such criticism is not necessarily one of opposing values; more often, the debate concerns media's relationship to real life. Opposing fans do not argue that adults should be able to engage in a relationship with a minor, nor do they argue that representation is unimportant (like my interviewees, most multifandom bloggers seem to agree that better representation would be a good thing). Instead, the argument often revolves around the source texts and their transformative elaborations being *fictional* and therefore not worth fighting over or having strong reactions against. It reflects an understanding of explorations and recombinations as 'just for fun' and overall harmless, fictional characters and virtual actions being viewed as detached from or secondary to real people and real life acts. Furthermore, social justice activities and discussions that relate the fictional and virtual to the real world, important as people may find them, are experienced as restricting the freedom to play as it brings normative structures to the platform—which in turn may risk fans' feelings of escapism or general enjoyment.

5.2.3 NEGOTIATING BOUNDARIES: TUMBLR AS RITUAL-GAME-STORY THING

What to make of the findings above? The conflicts and people's narratives about them reveal perceptions of fan practice and fiction that can be distinguished based on the ways in which the relationship between fictional reality, virtual reality, and real life is perceived. This is where Wagner's concept of the ritual-game-story thing proves useful. As discussed in section 2.2.4, Wagner discovered how different players of the video game *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* framed the game differently: Christian players perceived the game as a ritual that served as a training module for life, whereas U.S. solders explained it as 'just a game', a welcome escape from a harsh reality. According to Wagner, these different framings are rooted in the liminal nature of the magic circle. When the magic circle of the virtual world is perceived as thick or solid, normal rules are suspended and the outside world becomes bracketed—this is why for the soldiers, the acts inside the virtual world remain confined to the liminal space of the game. In contrast, the Christians approach the magic circle of the virtual world as thin or permeable, allowing the liminal space to spill over its boundaries as they intent their online acts to affect the outside world in some way (in this case their own abilities and experiences in it), thus seeking efficacy.[243]

For Wagner, the case study of *Left Behind* reveals that a virtual world can best be understood as a ritual-game-story thing: a 'complex blend of different types of interactivity' that involves a kind of transportation to another 'world' that is inscribed within a magic circle.[244] The concept of the ritual-game-story thing highlights the ambiguity of ritual-, game- and story-related experiences, drawing attention to the similarities that result from them all having a close relationship to narrative, conflict, interactivity, rules and play.[245] For Wagner, this means that rituals, games and stories involve overlapping forms of meaning-making that are primarily (if not only) distinguishable from each other by examining the approach of the player-performer. The question if something 'is' a ritual, a game, or both, is therefore an experiential rather than an ontological issue. Specifically, the answer depends on how the player-performer perceives the relationship between the acts within the magic circle and

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[243] Wagner, *Godwired*, 166.
[244] Ibid., 10.
[245] Ibid., 56.

the outside world: whereas rituals are rarely performed 'just for fun' and involve efficacy, with regard to games the ability of the magic circle to carry beyond itself is often ignored or dismissed.[246]

I would argue that on Tumblr, much of the drama revolves around a comparable kind of situation, i.e. a conflict of (mis)framing that results from Tumblr (i.e., Tumblr's fannish space) being a ritual-game-story thing. In section 3.2.1, I showed how the technological structures of the platform result in a procedural rhetoric or liturgical order that establishes a certain formality of practice and can contribute to the development of a normative structure. Section 4.3 showed how Tumblr constitutes a liminoid sphere, free from everyday life, in which fans can play with cultural elements—a type of play through which meaning can be performed and values can be created. These findings reveal that Tumblr has the features of a ritual-game-story thing. It is experienced as a world different from everyday life, a magic circle that has its own *rules and structures* (a 'disposition of its own', as Johan Huizinga would say) that people *interact* with, resulting in formalised (stylised, repetitive) performances. At the same time, Tumblr *leaves room* for individuals to tweak technological possibilities and decide on which actions to take and which content to create. It is in the content that we find elements of *narrative* and *conflict* (or ordering), as well as *yet another level of play*, as content and messages of media texts are (re)presented, elaborated and/or transformed.

Viewing Tumblr as a ritual-game-story thing helps to explain the different approaches people adopt towards Tumblr and offers a perspective from which to understand the perceptions of fan practice and fiction that exist on the platform. Especially when the narratives of media texts and transformative works involve values or are close to someone's lived experiences, this can lead to two perceptions of fandom that clash in moments of drama: one that stems from Tumblr being framed ritually, and one that stems from Tumblr being framed as a game. When fans key into a ritual frame, Tumblr serves as a ritual space in the sense that the structured, yet playful online acts are viewed as meaningful performances that are intended to have certain effects—outside as well as within Tumblr's liminoid sphere. Fan practices are in this view ritualised acts that can reinforce existing structures, that can bring about some kind of change, or that can provide an alternative perspective on the world and what is possible in it, even if only temporarily (something that resembles both Jonathan Z. Smith's argument about ritual being a way of performing the 'way things ought to be' and Utriainen's view on ritual efficacy).[247] In other words, online performance is perceived as an earnest tactic that allows fans (as textual poachers) to not only carve out a space for and make claims with regard to the narratives, meanings and values they relate to, but to also draw them down to non-fannish, everyday reality.

In addition, the ritual frame relates to a desire for fictional reality to be (experienced as) real. Similar to how the religious imagination of Utriainen's angel practitioners can be enacted and made to feel real through practices of ritual framing, fan practices on Tumblr—once Tumblr is framed as ritual space—become performances through which the (trans)mediated worlds and their fannish transformations are momentarily authenticated and turned into something powerful. It is an approach that fully opens up towards the ritual-like function of the liminoid as described by Turner: through fan practices, fans carry meanings and messages back into non-ritual reality, which enables

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[246] Wagner, *Godwired*, 76.
[247] Smith, *To Take Place*, 109.

them to make sense of the world around them.[248] The boundaries of the magic circle are thin, the interplay between fictional, virtual, and everyday reality foregrounded.

When people key the frame as game, however, the relationship between Tumblr's liminoid sphere and the outside world is viewed differently. Although Tumblr's features do not change, people argue that whatever is happening inside Tumblr's magic circle is just that—happening *inside* Tumblr's magic circle. In other words, instead of approaching Tumblr as a ritual space with potentially powerful performances, the capacity of the liminoid sphere to carry beyond itself is ignored, dismissed, or (more often) downplayed. Fan practices are not intended to, nor are they expected to have some kind of effect on the outside world, and they are not perceived as making any ultimate claims with regard to values or messages. Acts performed online are explained as just a game, their consequences contained within the boundaries of the virtual world. The 'act of faith' that people perform to give themselves over to the authority of the magic circle remains moreover purely metaphorical: the fictional world is no more than mere fiction, and any kind of performance that may authenticate it is reflexively looked back upon and rationalised as, ultimately, mere pretence.

These different approaches do not tell us much about the actual relations between virtual and non-virtual worlds, for as discussed at several places throughout this thesis and as shown by various scholars, the boundaries between them are rarely as solid as they seem.[249] Even so, if we understand the two opposing parties as having keyed into different framings, this would explain why something like exploring taboos through fan practice would by some be perceived as a harmless interest, while others would argue that limitations are needed because there is a very real and therefore potentially dangerous power to such practices. In conclusion, this means that the tension between the freedom to play and restrictive norms can be traced back to the different ways in which people view the relationship between virtual reality, fictional reality, and real life.

Although the possibility to frame Tumblr (and hence perceive fan practice and fiction) in more ways than one can result in tension, it also allows individual fans to navigate between different framings, applying both as they shape their personal fannishness. This kind of navigation was visible in both the entries of individual bloggers and the accounts of interviewees. One the one hand, people talked and/or blogged about the (symbolic) messages of media texts and fanworks; about (the importance of) fan criticism; about the personal meanings and lessons that texts and fanworks carry; about recognising yourself in characters and being emotionally affected by what you encounter; and about using Tumblr to draw the object of fandom down to everyday life, the platform functioning as a trigger or port of entry into fictional worlds and their characters. On the other hand, people described media texts as 'just fiction'; emphasised the pretence behind exaggerated emotional responses; talked about criticism and conflicts as needlessly fierce; and described practices and reactions as silly or needlessly excessive. These seemingly contradictory understandings of media's relationship to real life could succeed each other rapidly or occur almost simultaneously. Someone could for example post about how much a fanwork or work of fiction meant to them or about what it has taught them, taking part in engaged fannish practices on the subject, while a few moments later that same person in another thread could emphasise the show's fictional nature or argue that

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[248] Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 108.

[249] I.e., virtual worlds do affect us after we have logged off and can interrelate in all kinds of ways with people's everyday life and lived experiences. See also section 2.2.3, *Persistent liminality*.

fiction and fan practice are not worth arguing over. Ultimately, this confirms just how ambiguous ritual-game-story things and people's experiences with regard to them are.

5.3 CONCLUSION

This last analytical chapter explored two things: the role of framings in how media fans come to understand and experience Tumblr from everyday contexts, and the narratives fans create about fandom and fictional media texts.

Chapter 5.1 showed how Tumblr has a in principle 'streaming' nature: i.e., it has the potential to spill over into our everyday lives and vice versa. On the one hand, this can be traced back to the liminoid play on Tumblr (people reference and play with real life cultural elements). On the other hand, this results from Tumblr's ability to continuously draw people's attention in the midst of everyday life. However, despite this streaming nature (or perhaps because of it), people's interview accounts revealed that rather than them being caught in a persistent state of hovering between two worlds that results in a consistent ambiguous experience, fans attempt to draw up boundary markers between both worlds— a practice also known as framing. This enables them to navigate dynamically between virtual reality and other social realities. While doing this, people are highly aware of the (dominant discourses of the) everyday contexts they find themselves in.

Chapter 5.2 was also concerned with people's negotiation of different realities, but in the context of how fans make sense of fan practice and fictional works. I started with an explanation of why 'drama' (which occurs in different forms, but generally results from a particularly strong tension between the freedom to play and restrictive norms) is a useful starting point from which to analyse people's perceptions of fandom and fiction. After a detailed description of several examples of drama, I used Rachel Wagner's concept of the ritual-game-story thing to propose a way to understand what kinds of perceptions of fan practice and fiction underlie the tension between freedom and restrictive norms that often results in drama. I showed that Tumblr, as a virtual world that relies on interactivity, rules, play, narrative and conflict, can be seen as a ritual-game-story thing. I then argued that this enables fans to frame Tumblr both ritually and as game, the difference between the two approaches being the perceived relationship between the realities of fan practice and fictional (transformative) works, and reality as people know it from their daily lives (not to confuse with the actual interrelations between these realities). While practices and experiences on Tumblr can be irrelevant and 'just a game' at one moment, the media texts being mere fiction, the next moment Tumblr can be understood as a ritual space in which fan practices are powerful, tactical performances with potential efficacy. Although in moments of drama these two perspectives clash, they also make it possible for individual fans to navigate them, keying dynamically in and out of the framings depending on the situation.

Although Utriainen's notion of dynamic framings is not explicitly mentioned in chapter 5.2, the fluid ways in which people key in and out a ritual and/or a game frame can be viewed as an example of dynamic framings, which in this case indeed seems to be a fluid and almost unnoticeable practice. That is, based on the data gathered in this study I could not find clear boundary markers that resulted in different perspectives on fan practice or fiction. One promising avenue of research could therefore be to further examine the connection between the findings of chapters 5.1 and 5.2: how do everyday contexts and the resulting understandings of Tumblr (i.e., Tumblr as either an enjoyable, relaxing, and therefore enriching activity or a distractive, indulgent, and time-wasting activity that risks other spheres

of life and leaves a sense of guilt) relate to people's perception of fan practice and fiction, especially in how they relate them to their lived reality?

For example, it seems reasonable to assume that high reflexivity due to everyday contexts results in an understanding of Tumblr that is closer to a framing in which fan practice is set aside as less important or 'just a game'. In contrast, lying alone on your bed or on the couch in the evening, after all work is finished and you can set your mind off of everyday concerns, may (combined with specific boundary work) result in a ritual framing in which the fictional is approached as-if it were real and fan practice is allowed to touch everyday life now it no longer involves any risks. At the same time, however, an escape from everyday grind and personal hardships after a long day of work might also prioritise enjoyment or relaxation above critical fan practice that relates back to people's lived (social and political) realities. In this case, framing fan practice as 'just a game' and fiction as 'just fiction' helps to avoid heated debates and to protect personal enjoyment (a stance that for example becomes visible in figure 11 (p. 78), where fans argue against fan criticism because it would 'ruin the fun').[250] Particularly important in this regard would be to consider *whose* fun it is that is being ruined, i.e. which fans have the privilege to be able to bracket fan practice as a mere game. Whatever this examination would result in, on thing remains clear: looking at people's ability to key in and out of different frames is essential to our understanding of how fandom and fiction become meaningful in both people's personal and shared social lives.

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[250] That is not to say that criticism may not also be enjoyable to fans—it often is, but for my interviewees there was a distinctly negative element to it.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION: WHAT THE OFFLINE CAN TELL US

In a society where people constantly engage in realities beyond their personal, day-to-day lives—the fictional worlds of media texts, the virtual worlds of the Internet—the question rises how and where these worlds become meaningful to people and how these different realities interrelate. Fandom in particular, which nowadays largely takes place online, is a phenomenon in which different realities intertwine visibly. Media fans participate in an active and intense manner in media texts via online fan spaces, and in doing so they can elaborate fictional worlds in ways that are personally meaningful and provide alternative visions of the world around them.

Tumblr is one of the places where fandom is thriving. Research on Tumblr has slowly developed over the past few years, but with a strong focus on what happens *on* the platform. In contrast, this thesis attempted to move beyond the online content to include Tumblr's material structures, such as interface features and technological affordances, and people's use of the platform from everyday contexts. The aim of this thesis was twofold. First, it aimed to obtain a better understanding of how and where fictional worlds become meaningful to people and what the place of social media is in this process. Second, it set out to explore the potential of a ritual studies perspective for the study of (online) fandom, inspired by the study of lived religion—a field that is also concerned with people's actual, everyday engagement with and understandings of specific (in this case religious) realities that are different from ordinary society. This resulted in the research question:

How do the material structures of blogging platform Tumblr and the everyday contexts from which media fans use Tumblr shape the ways in which these fans make meaning from fandom and, by extension, fictional media texts that are the objects of fandom?

In answering this question, this study has shown that focusing solely on what people do online does not show the total picture of how fandom and fiction become meaningful to people in their actual lives. Material structures of online platforms (including the devices used to enter them) and everyday contexts matter in how people make meaning from fandom and fiction, therefore they need to be taken into consideration. The main reason for this is that fans understand and experience Tumblr, and fandom on Tumblr, differently in different contexts due to framings: contextual delimitations or boundary markers set in sometimes subtle ways by themselves. Moreover, when fans are able to successfully key in and out of specific framings, this enables them to sensitively negotiate the relationship between fictional, virtual and everyday realities so that their fannish engagements enrich rather than complicate their lives. This inevitably has consequences for how they make meaning from the fictional media texts that are the object of fandom, especially in terms of how these meaning-making activities are directed outward to their everyday reality and the world around them. Interactions with fictional worlds through fandom (most notably in the form of transformative work) are therefore not automatically the powerful, potentially world-changing engagements that some scholars have argued it to be.

In this concluding chapter, I reflect on the path that led to these findings. I recapitulate the answers to the three subquestions of this study and relate the outcomes to each other in order to answer the main

question. After that, I discuss the shortcomings of this study as well as its implications for future research on media fandom, online culture, and ritual.

6.1 MATERIAL MATTERS

The first subquestion focused on Tumblr's material structures and asked how these shape fan practice on Tumblr and media fans' use of Tumblr in everyday life. This is relevant because, as many scholars from both the field of computer-mediated communication and fan studies have pointed out, technology shapes online interpersonal communication and cultural practices—and therefore shapes the ways in which people engage with, experience, and make sense of online fandom and fiction.

In short, Tumblr's material structures have made Tumblr fan culture what it is: a culture of 'feels' in which structured yet playful collective, transformative practices are performed from a personal home base. Due to its search-and-follow system, the dashboard has become a personalised hub where fans 'are' when they visit Tumblr and from where they experience the presence of others. Although contested by a discourse of professionalism that emphasises skill and individual artists' rights, the dashboard allows fans to collectively engage in (largely visual) discussions, expansions and elaborations of the fictional worlds of now ever-changing media texts. Hashtags have been essential to the development of interest-based hashtag groups and therefore to the broader sociocultural structure of Tumblr. They are also an important means through which fans playfully perform affect, and they allow for the circulation of blog entries in a manner that makes them part of a procedural rhetoric or liturgical order. That is, following Roy Rappaport's conceptualisation of the liturgical order of ritual, to which formality and invariance are intrinsic, I argued that the recurrence of (largely) the same formalised entries on the platform, as collective performances that carry (symbolic) messages, has the ability to create and reaffirm specific orientations, values and ideologies on the platform.

Technological affordances and material features also shape where and in what mindset people use Tumblr. Because of the Tumblr app, people can take Tumblr with them wherever they go, visiting the platform in all kinds of circumstances via various devices. However, despite this mobility, fans tend to choose carefully whether or not to enter Tumblr depending on the context they are in. Material structures are important to this (the app lacks affordances and small mobile screens are generally associated with more 'distractive' Tumblr sessions, in contrast to bigger screens that allow users to take in content more attentively), but so are social contexts. That is, fans are highly aware of their surroundings when entering Tumblr, as they want to avoid visiting the platform in places where people will likely misunderstand or judge them for it. Public places are therefore often a no-go, whereas the confines of their own home or bedroom receives fans' preference. Thus, despite fandom becoming increasingly part of mainstream culture, fans still feel the need to negotiate (perceived, and partly internalised) common discourses on fandom and social media use that label it as something negative or taboo, particularly when it comes to fannish expressions of sex, obsession, and emotional excess.

6.2 LIMINOID SPHERES: FREEDOM AND THE POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

Fans' negotiation of discourses surrounding fandom and media points toward a complex relationship between the virtual, fannish reality of Tumblr and the outside world. This also became visible when we took a closer look at how people make sense of Tumblr. Building on Rachel Wagner's theoretical insights

on virtual worlds as magic circles that may constitute liminal space, the second subquestion was: *how do media fans describe and experience Tumblr, and in what ways do their descriptions reveal Tumblr to be a liminal or liminoid sphere?*

One of the aims of this study has been to explore how ritual theory can be of value in the study of online fandom. An important finding in this regard has been that ritual theory on liminality and the related liminoidity has proven to be helpful in obtaining a better understanding of Tumblr as fan space and transformative work as a culturally relevant practice. Victor Turner argues that contemporary 'performative genres' such as theatre, television and other media technologies are connected to social dramas, and function in this regard as meaning-making of world-building devices. Turner explains this as liminoidity's ritual-like function, something through which the liminoid can provide a 'multiplicity of alternative models for living.'[251] This argument shows striking parallels with the notion of fictional worlds as playgrounds and symbolic resources that may instigate personal or social change. Specifically, it reminds of Louisa Stein's remarks on how millennial fandom directs its visions of an alternative or transformed culture outward, into the non-fannish world.[252] This potential for cultural change is indeed something Tumblr has.

In the interview data, I found that fans consistently describe and experience Tumblr as different from everyday life and other social media; my interviewees talked about Tumblr as a separate entity, a culture or world of its own. Tumblr's perceived otherworldliness can be traced back, not only to its specific cultural and social structures, but also to it being explicitly free from the obligations and social norms and expectations of everyday life. This results in Tumblr being associated with leisure, relaxation and enjoyment. The 'freedom from' that fans experience on Tumblr is the first indication of Tumblr as liminoid sphere. Similar to the liminal phases of rites of passage, liminoid spheres are set apart from the normative structures of everyday life and have a 'betwixt and between' nature. This gives people the freedom to perform (generally playful) behaviour through which they can combine familiar cultural elements and symbols in any possible way, including ways that normally would be considered taboo. These experimental explorations can be subversive and critical of the status quo, especially when performed in liminoid (rather than liminal) settings, since these reside in the independent cultural margins and are not part of society's central processes (which liminal activities are).

The freedom to play and its ludic, subversive character are central to Tumblr's fan culture. Through their transformative work, fans playfully deconstruct and recombine cultural elements from both the real world and the fictional worlds of media texts in many ways, performing meaning while doing so. Because of this, Tumblr has become a threshold between not only the normative structures of everyday life, but also between the real world and fictional worlds—elements from both realities serve as foundations-for-form that people base their transformative play on. The high levels of freedom in this play, its voluntary, continuous and often critical nature, the multiplicity of possibilities and sense of enjoyment it generates, and the role of individual fan artists all reveal Tumblr to be a typical liminoid sphere in which liminoid activities are performed. Following Turner's argument, this consequently means that the fannish space of Tumblr can fulfil a ritual-like function that comes with the potential to bring about cultural change.

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[251] Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 33, 108.
[252] Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 175-176.

However, there is a catch to Tumblr's liminoidity. Whereas it should be a free region of culture, we saw earlier that Tumblr's programmed software results in collective, formalised, invariant practices (blog posts) that can be viewed as ritualised performances, and that have the ability to create and reaffirm specific orientations, values and ideologies on the platform. Because of this, the performance of meaning through play can result in normative structures that conflict with Tumblr's liminoidity and limit the freedom to play; my interviewees repeatedly mentioned that their freedom to express themselves, to blog about anything they like, and to explore fictional worlds in whatever way they want has become increasingly restricted. For Turner, this 'intrusion of structure' is an inescapable phenomenon, but for my interviewees it results in a difficult tension between freedom and restrictive norms within Tumblr fan culture. This raised the question of how this tension can be explained, which could be answered in the context of the third subquestion.

6.3 FRAMING THE VIRTUAL/FICTIONAL

The third subquestion further explored how fans negotiate the relationship between Tumblr and everyday reality. Specifically, it used the concept of dynamic framings to examine **a)** how the experience of Tumblr as 'other' comes about, and **b)** what this means for people's perception of fandom and fiction. The question read: *What is the role of framings in how media fans come to understand and experience Tumblr from everyday contexts, and what kind of perceptions of fandom and fiction result from these understandings?*

In contrast to Rachel Wagner's argument that the 'streaming' nature of virtuality has resulted in blurred boundaries between different spheres of life, and therefore in a consistently ambiguous experience of hovering between worlds, this study has shown that fans manage these boundaries sensitively and actively redraw them in order to confine Tumblr to specific spheres of life when needed. The ability to dynamically employ framings lies at the heart of this sensitive negotiation, and it strongly contributes to Tumblr's perceived otherworldliness. This negotiation of the relationship between Tumblr and everyday life is in turn essential to fans' perceptions of fan practices and the fictional worlds featured in these practices.

Chapter 3 showed the first indications of framing practices surrounding Tumblr: despite the material mobility of Tumblr, fans choose carefully where (not) to visit Tumblr. Technological affordances play a part in this, but fans also consider the social context they are in, in the process negotiating common discourses on fandom and social media use. Chapter 5 explored these sensitive negotiations further, and found that *because of* Tumblr's streaming nature, fans use dynamic framings—(subtle) boundary markers or contextual delimitations in the form of specific times, places, and sometimes devices—to set Tumblr apart from the everyday contexts of school, family and work. Tumblr's liminoidity is therefore no coincidence, but a result of fans' own boundary work. Here, too, the boundary work of fans is related to (perceived and partly internalised) discourses on fandom and social media use. Being able to employ framings dynamically has therefore becomes an important skill that enables fans to key in and out of different realities (the fannish, virtual reality of Tumblr and other social realities they engage in), in the process changing their perspective on Tumblr so that they can protect Tumblr's enriching enjoyment from daily obligations and expectations, and their personal productivity and social credibility from Tumblr.

The deliberate bracketing of Tumblr also has important consequences for how fandom and fiction are perceived. These perceptions reveal themselves most clearly in moments of drama and turned out to be fundamental to the tension between the freedom to play and restrictive norms within Tumblr fan culture. Tumblr constitutes a set-apart world or 'magic circle' that relies on interactivity, rules, play, narrative, and conflict. Because of this, it characterises as a ritual-game-story thing: an ambiguous hybrid that emphasises the overlapping features of rituals, games and stories, and that may be viewed as any of them depending on how the player-performer approaches it. Looking at Tumblr as this kind of hybrid, I found that fans approach Tumblr in different ways. One moment, Tumblr is framed ritually, being understood as a ritual space where fan practices are earnest, tactical performances intended to affect (perspectives on) the real, outside world. These fan practices momentarily authenticate the fictional worlds of media texts and turn them into something powerful. The next moment, Tumblr is framed as a game, the capacity of fannish performances to carry beyond themselves and affect real life being ignored, dismissed or downplayed, and the worlds of fictional (transformative) works remaining mere fiction. With this in mind, the tension between the freedom to play and restrictive norms can be said to develop from a conflict of (mis)framing: different people have a different understanding of the ways in which virtual reality, fictional reality, and real life relate. As a result, fans disagree on the risk that unrestricted liminoid play carries and on what fan practice should be about.

In negotiating the relationship between Tumblr's fannish reality and the reality of their everyday life, it seems that as soon as fans feel the need to protect their personal enjoyment, which strongly relates to their freedom to play, they foreground the game frame at expense of a ritual one. In contrast, as soon as fan practices and fictional worlds revolve around ideological topics (particularly with regard to norms and values that concern people's personal lives), the ritual frame becomes foregrounded. This means that the different frames are interlaced and can succeed each other rapidly or even exist almost simultaneously as fans dynamically key in and out of them. In other words, although the game frame and ritual frame sometimes clash, they also allow fans to navigate between different perceptions on fandom and fiction and their relation to the outside world. This ultimately confirms the nature of ritual-game-story things as complex blends, their individual components being intertwined hybrids rather than separate entities.

6.4 THE CULTURAL POWER OF FICTIONAL WORLDS

In conclusion, this study showed that material features and everyday contexts are fundamental to how fans make sense of Tumblr, fan practice on Tumblr, and the fictional media texts that are the object of fandom. Tumblr's liminoid nature derives from the framings fans employ in their everyday lives, and the ability to dynamically key in and out of these frames is an important skill that allows fans to negotiate different realities and consequent perspectives on Tumblr, fandom and fiction. So, how do the material structures of Tumblr and the everyday contexts from which media fans use Tumblr shape the ways in which these fans make meaning from fandom and, by extension, the fictional media texts that are the objects of fandom?

As the introduction of this thesis pointed out, fictional worlds are commonly understood as safe playgrounds and symbolic resources that we use to create narratives about and reflect on how the world is, could, or should be. In this context, fan scholars (like Louisa Stein) have argued that fandom, through transformative work, utilises these fictional worlds to create visions of an alternative or transformed

culture. These alternative perspectives and possibilities are thought to be directed outward largely thanks to digital media, its ubiquity having resulted in an increased visibility of fan practice in mainstream culture and a breakdown of boundaries between online, fannish reality and the offline, non-fannish world. However, my findings only partially support this proposition, and I therefore argue that it has to be nuanced.

Tumblr, being the liminoid sphere that it is, allows fans to explore fictional worlds and to use them as symbolic resources; in this regard, Tumblr becomes the playground, a threshold between fictional worlds and real life where cultural elements from both realities can be taken apart and recombined in a multiplicity of ways. This process involves a performance of meaning that, due to the ritualised dimensions of Tumblr's technological features, may lead to the creation of values or even a normative structure on the platform. These meaning-making practices in turn have an intricate relationship to people's lived reality and can in potential be directed outward. Fan practice may in this regard be in line with offline normative structures or it can be a form of criticism against them; an attempt to affect some kind of change, even if only in perspective.

However, the liminoid's potential to bring about cultural change does not necessarily come to fruition. After all, Tumblr's nature as enjoyable liminoid playground depend precisely on Tumblr being *detached* from the outside world. This is why the freedom to play exists in constant tension with restrictive norms from both on- and offline reality, and it is why fans employ framing techniques that create different perspectives on what Tumblr, fandom and fiction are about. Although there are moments when the fictional and virtual are explicitly related to and carried over into real life (effectively accepting the streaming nature of virtuality), at other times this possibility is deliberately pushed aside. This reveals a complex negotiation of Tumblr's fannish reality, where fan practices are (performed as) meaningful, engrossing and worthwhile, and where fictional worlds and characters represent real life equivalents, and other social realities in which fan practices and fictional worlds are not or cannot be approached in such a way. Sometimes, then, it is simply better to set Tumblr and fan practice aside as something silly or distractive that is best not taken too seriously, fiction remaining no more than mere fiction.

In the end, this shows that fictional worlds become meaningful to people in complex ways, the material structures and perceptions of social media platforms through which people engage with these worlds being highly relevant to how meanings are made from fandom and fictional media texts that are the objects of fandom. Consequently, we have to reconsider what it means to be able to enter other realities from anywhere we like, examining up close what shape this actually takes in the context of contemporary everyday life, and adjust our scholarly perception of the cultural power of fictional worlds accordingly.

6.5 IMPROVEMENTS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with any research project, this study has its shortcomings. Because it was conducted as part of a master's thesis, the results are based on only a small group of participants. Particularly with regard to the interviews and home visits, I was confined to Dutch boarders, which resulted in six interviews with white, mostly cisgender females (Sam being the exception). Unsurprisingly, this shaped the results from the interview data; on a strongly U.S.-centred platform, where discussions reflect the public debates of American society, my Dutch interviewees made sense of this in relation to their own social and cultural background. I therefore believe there is much to be gained, not just by conducting more interviews, but

by specifically interviewing fans from different backgrounds. Issues like gender, ethnicity and sexuality in particular seem to play an important role with regard to how fan practice and fiction are perceived. For example, it might be that practices involving issues of representation are less often framed as 'just a game' when it involves someone's personal experience of being under- or misrepresented in the media. In other words, the question arises if *any* fan has the ability to bracket the real world and enter the game frame, or if it involves certain kinds of privilege to do so.

In addition, I believe this study can be improved by using additional research methods to examine people's framing practices in more detail. This might also result in a more precise understanding of the exact relationship between everyday contexts and consequent perceptions of fandom and fiction. Options would be to observe a day in the life of participants to see how, where, and when they engage with fictional worlds (through social media or otherwise). Another, perhaps more feasible option would be to ask participants to keep a journal in which to track how, when, where, in which circumstances they engage with fictional worlds, and what their experiences are in those moments. Furthermore, life story interviewing techniques might be valuable in unravelling how people's engagements with and understandings of fandom and fiction have developed over time, with their current perceptions and experiences as a result.

Despite these shortcomings, I hope that if there is anything this thesis has shown, it is that we cannot overlook the offline components of our online engagement with fictional worlds. The ones who make meaning from fictional media texts, even if that occurs primarily through screens and online platforms, are always, inevitably, embodied human beings. Knowing this, I would like to suggest (or rather highlight) two possible directions for future research.

One topic that I have not elaborated upon but that forms an important perspective in many studies on virtual reality and fandom, is that of identity and interpersonal relationships. This study indicates that fans build meaningful relationships online and that the social aspect of blogging (being in the presence of others who enjoy the same things you do and talking with like-minded people) is very important to them. Moreover, some Tumblr users feel that Tumblr allows them to be vulnerable and more themselves compared to other social media platforms.[253] This raises questions with regard to how people form impressions of others and manage their own identity in the context of a platform where people continuously perform affect and where identifying features like icons and usernames are relatively anonymous and primarily interest-related. Social information processing theory (in terms of both the kind of information people use to form an impression of others and present themselves, and the time it takes to obtain this information) and the hyperpersonal model of CMC (especially in terms of the impact of self-disclosure on intimacy within contexts of interpersonal computer-mediated communication[254]) may in this regard provide useful frameworks.[255]

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[253] This was also found by Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter in their study on Tumblr fandom. Hillman, Procyk, and Neustadter, "Tumblr and the Fandom User Experience," 6-7.

[254] See e.g. Patti M. Valkenburg and Jochen Peter, "Social Consequences of the Internet for Adolescents: A Decade of Research," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 15 (2009): 1-5; or Cristal L. Jiang, Natalya N. Bazarova, and Jeffrey T. Hancock, "The Disclosure-Intimacy Link in Computer-Mediated Communication: An Attributional Extension of the Hyperpersonal Model," *Human Communication Research* 37 (2011): 58-77. They found that more self-disclosure and the ways in which CMC promotes self-disclosure (e.g. due to the relative lack of social context cues) result in more intimacy or higher quality of relationships among people.

[255] Walther, "Theories of Computer-Mediated Communication," 458-466.

Something I did pay close attention to is the value of ritual theory for the study of (online) fandom. As a field that concerns itself with the creation of and relationship between realities—one of them being a reality that opens up toward a subjunctive mode of being and that from other contexts is regarded as less 'real'—ritual studies (as applied in the study of lived religion) shows remarkable parallels to the field of fan studies. This thesis has shown that ritual theory, in particular the concepts of dynamic framing and the ritual-game-story thing, can deepen our understanding of how and where fandom and fiction become meaningful to people (or not). One possible direction that future research could take in relation to these findings, is to further examine how ritualised practices surrounding fandom contribute to experiences of enchantment or 'realness' with regard to fictional realities, in the sense that something extraordinary can be felt in the midst of everyday life.[256] For example, my participants recalled moments when they were suddenly reminded of a character or message throughout the day and they explained how they sometimes deliberately 'step into' their favourite fictional worlds in order to leave everyday grind behind. This shows similarities to how Utriainen's angel practitioners (through dynamic framing) let the enchanted, ritual reality of angels briefly touch their everyday lives. Wagner has argued that such moments of ritual make-belief show parallels to fictional make-believe (something close to the suspension of disbelief), since both involve performances that direct our attention in specific ways and both stem from a desire for the imaginative to be real.[257] In this context, too, it might be fruitful to examine the role of framings in how this experience of fictional worlds 'as if' they were real comes about and may enrich everyday life. For this, I hope that this thesis has laid at least part of the foundation.

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[256] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5.

[257] Wagner, *Godwired*, 215-217.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A - TUMBLR MEDIA FANDOM PRACTICES

Tumblr allows users to create different types of posts. These are: **1)** text posts that can be as long as you like, and to which you can add pictures or GIFs; **2)** photo sets that consist of one or more pictures, to which you can add text that is displayed below the pictures; **3)** quotes, which appear in a different font; **4)** 'chat posts' that show imagined or retold conversations in again another font; **5)** audio messages; **6)** videos; **7)** links to for example another website or a news article; and lastly **8)** ask posts, which are messages users answer publicly on their weblog. Over the years, media fans have used these options to develop a specific set of cultural practices. This appendix gives an overview and explanation of these practices for reference.

A.1 CLOSE-READING AND ANALYSIS

Fans are known for the way they dive into the thing they love and know all there is to know about it. It is therefore no surprise to find posts that contain detailed readings and analyses of different media texts (be it books, series, films or games) and the story lines, plots, character development, symbolism, and (hidden) meanings and messages they offer. Others can reblog such a post in agreement or to share the new-found knowledge with their own followers. They might also add additional information or insights to the post or convey their own opinions in the hashtags—something that can also happen when the post itself contains no more than a fragment from a scene (e.g. figure I, p. 100). Sometimes, when people disagree or are not convinced, an analytic post develops into a discussion between fans.

Fans use blog posts to analyse and theorise about fictional stories and characters on different levels, including meta level (theorising about the fictional universe itself). No matter what level their argument focuses on, fans on Tumblr generally build it by zooming in on small details and specific scenes—a close-reading of the media text. My interviewees repeatedly mentioned the fun in looking closely at their favourite texts and/or seeing others make the effort to explain small, sometimes symbolic elements to build an argument. For example, Floortje says that 'research is always fun to read' when it involves theories about what could have happened or attempts to find hidden meanings in an episode. Lynn explains how her attention gets drawn to detail while she is rewatching an episode of her favourite anime (Japanese animation):

> Sometimes I rewatch an episode, just for fun, and then I notice these details like: he sounded way too calm, that's really not like him when he says something like that… and then, I also just list all these little details and I start asking: would he have been crafting—that's from one of the episodes—because he says such a thing, so maybe he has been awake all the time to make that… so then I will look at: what did the writer think about here, that he let this happen.

As you can see, Lynn actively tries to track down the motives of the writers of the show by close-reading what happened during the episode.
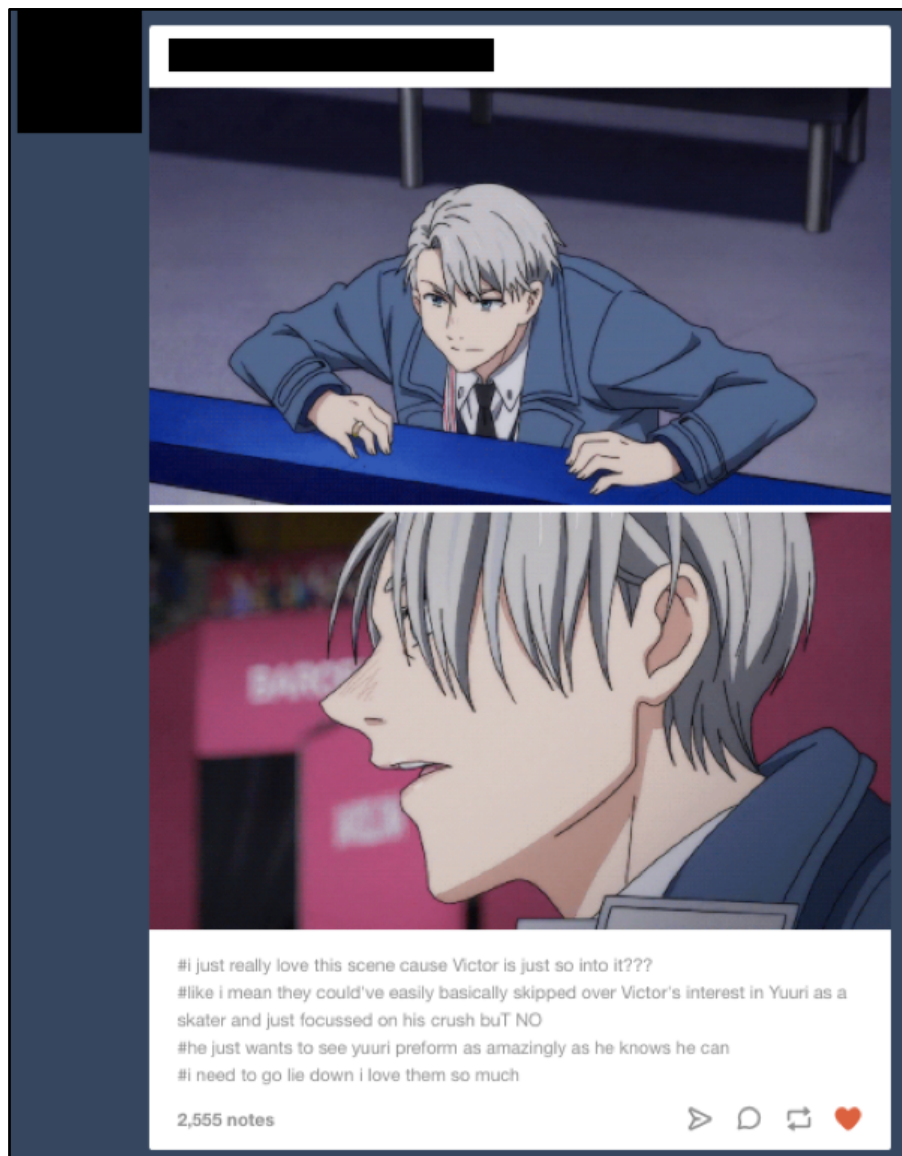
FIGURE I. CLOSE-READING OF A SCENE FRAGMENT VIA HASHTAGS.

A.2 HEADCANONS AND AUS

In addition to posts that specifically analyse elements of a media text, text posts can also describe headcanons or alternative universes (AUs). The official media text as produced by its writers or creators is among fans known as the 'canon'. *Head*canons are things fans consider to be true 'in their head' based on the evidence the canon has provided. AUs are scenarios in which the characters are transported, as it were, to an alternative universe, which allows a different story to unfold. For example, a popular AU is the so-called coffeeshop AU, where fans build a story with existing characters that takes place in or around a coffeeshop (e.g. one character working behind the counter while the other buys a cup of coffee, the two meeting and the story developing from there). Another common but slightly different type of AU is the social media AU, where fans create an image of a social media account (for example an Instagram account) of a fictional character, thus hauling the characters into our actual universe (figure II). Sometimes fans also mention 'what ifs'. What ifs are more or less the same as AUs, for they are explorations of possible scenarios that could have happened if something in the story had gone

different. All these explorations (headcanons in particular) can be developed from detailed analysis or close-readings of the canon and often form the basis of fanworks such as fan fiction and fan art. On Tumblr, fans also present them simply in the form of lists (figure III), short text entries, or chat posts that show a (possible) conversation between characters.
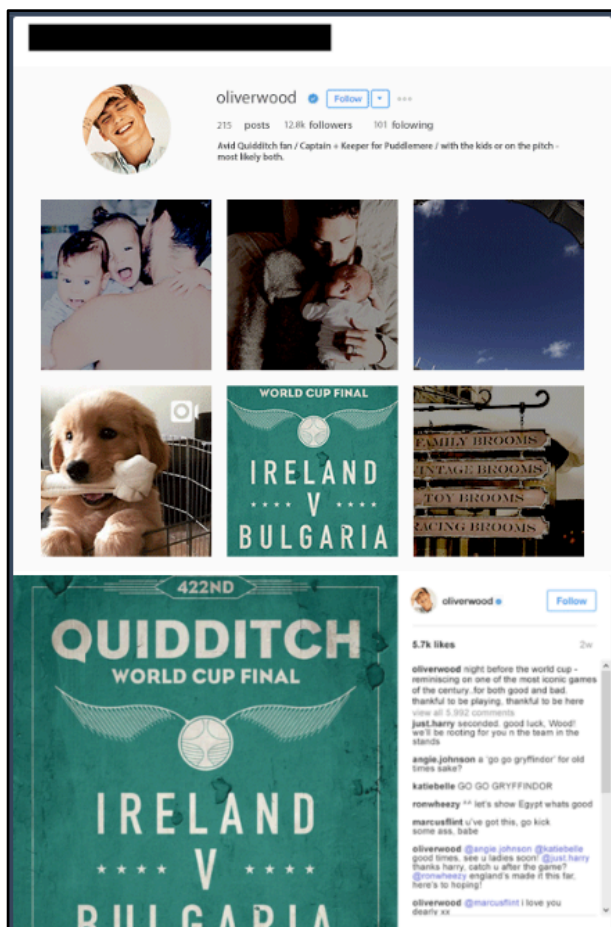

FIGURE II. FRAGMENT OF A SOCIAL MEDIA AU THAT REIMAGINES A FICTIONAL CHARACTER AS SOCIAL MEDIA USER.
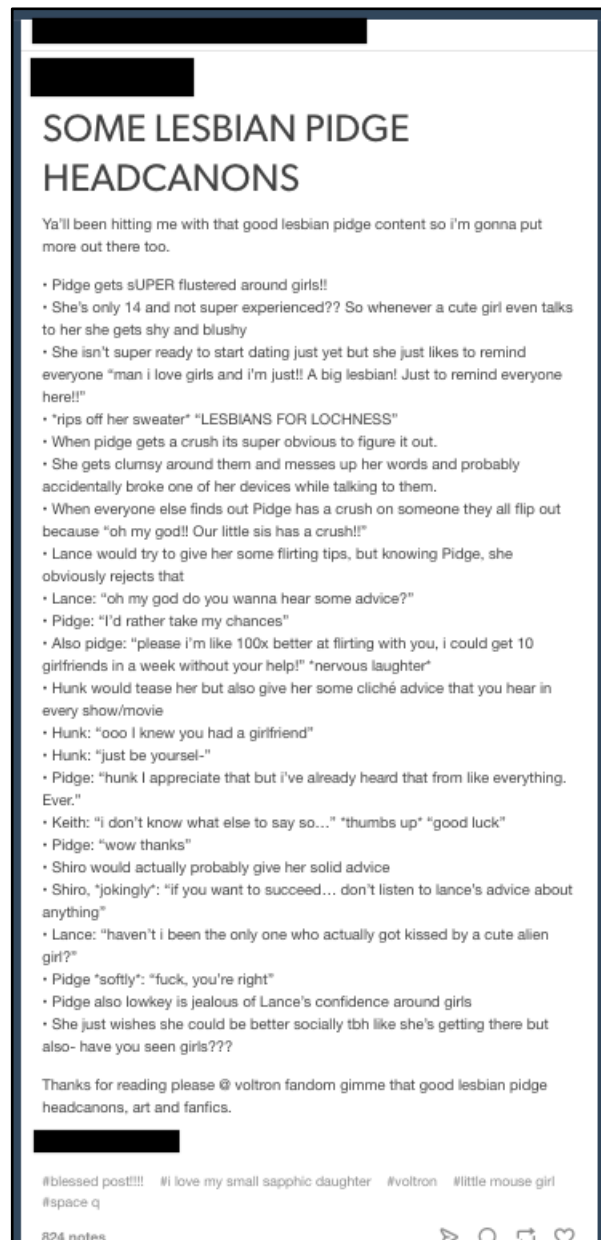

FIGURE III. HEADCANONS THAT FILL IN A CHARACTER'S SEXUALITY.

A.3 SHIPS

A specific kind of practice that is central to many headcanons, AUs, and other fanworks is the practice of shipping. Shipping deserves some elaboration as it is an exemplification of the centrality of characters within Tumblr media fandom; many of the fan practices and experiences on Tumblr revolve around or are channelled through fictional characters, and shipping is something that lies at the heart of much of

this. If you 'ship' two (sometimes three) characters[258], this means you support a romantic relationship between them. For example, to say that you 'ship Draco/Harry' means that you envision a romantic relationship between Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter from the *Harry Potter* series. Within Tumblr's media fandom, close-readings and explorations are often about characters' backgrounds, past experiences and (emotional) developments; fanworks regularly depict characters; and characters are frequently used to talk about and reflect upon personal experiences and interests. At the heart of such practices fairly often lies a ship—a (romantically envisioned) dynamic or interaction between characters that someone enjoys and wants to see more of or explore further. For example, shipping Draco/Harry can encourage you to explore the dynamics of such a relationship through fan fiction, to depict the characters together in a piece of art, and to draw up your own headcanons about what their interaction would look like based on what you know about them from the canon text.

FIGURE IV. FAN ART IN WHICH TWO CHARACTERS ARE SHIPPED.

FIGURE V. SHIPS CAN ALSO BE PART OF DARKER EXPLORATIONS.

Shipping comes with its own abbreviations. Ships develop for example their own names (e.g. Draco/Harry is referred to as Drarry) and users often refer to OTPs and NOTPs—respectively their ultimate ship or One True Pairing and their least favourite ship (the N in the abbreviation forming the word 'no'). The latter can sometimes even become the object of anti-fandom: behaviour that specifically goes against the ship and its shippers. As such, ships do not only lie at the heart of many posts, they can also form the basis of interactions between fans. In sum, ships may not guide all fan practices, but they are an important phenomenon in Tumblr fan culture.

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[258] Sometimes, real (non-fictional) people are shipped as well, but this is a controversial practice as some fans consider it to be problematic and/or morally wrong.

Fan fiction is perhaps the most well-known fan activity: stories written by fans that—with regard to media fandom[259]—feature the universe and characters that the canon product has offered, but that reveal another perspective or a (sometimes entirely) different storyline. On websites such as fanfiction.net and archiveofourown.org (AO3) you can find millions of stories connected to thousands of different fandoms. The genre and length of these fanfics differ, from Porn-Without-Plot (relatively short stories that are heavily (if not only) focused on sexual acts between characters; also known as Plot-What-Plot because of the secondary role of the story line) to cleverly crafted thrillers, and from short so-called 'one-shots' or 'ficlets' to book-length works of more than twenty chapters. On Tumblr, users recommend fan fics they enjoyed and post updates of their (and sometimes others') stories. Most of the time, such posts link to the aforementioned fan fiction websites, but sometimes users publish a new chapter on both a website like AO3 and their weblog. Users also exchange writing resources and prompts: requests from fellow fans to a fic writer to write something in particular. Prompts, ficlets, or even shorter 'drabbles' can also be found in their entirety on Tumblr, often posted under a user's personal fanfic hashtag.

Tumblr, being the microblogging platform it is, has also allowed another type of fanwork to flourish: fan art. Fan art is any kind of artwork that is made by a fan and that depicts their object of fandom, but Tumblr users generally use the term 'fan art' to refer to fan-made (digital) drawings, paintings and comics. These works can picture the fan's favourite actors and artists or, as is often the case with regard to media fandom, fictional characters and scenes. Just like fan fiction, fan art can depict many different things of different quality. Sometimes

FIGURE VI. HEADCANON EXPRESSED IN A SHORT DRABBLE, ELABORATED UPON BY ANOTHER USER.

fan art depicts places, objects and scenery from a fictional universe, but most of the time it is centred around fictional characters and their interaction with each other. That includes scenes from the canon text, but also headcanons and AUs that revolve around characters' backgrounds, personalities, sexualities, friendships, and romantic and sexual relationships. Crossovers between different media texts (e.g. characters from different fictional worlds meeting each other, or the transportation of
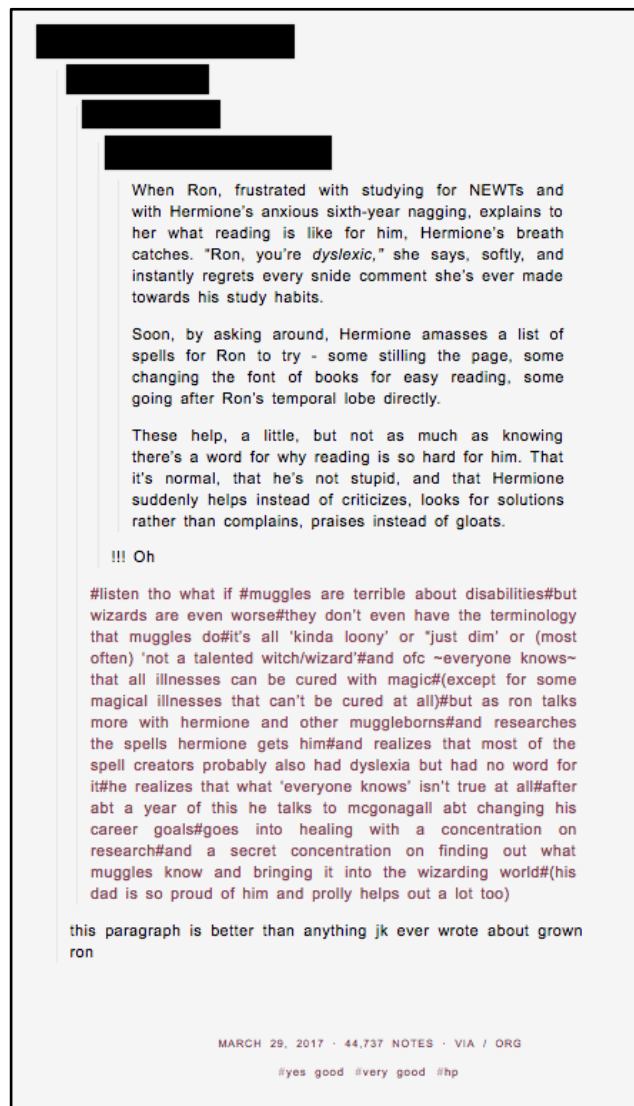
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[259] Fan fiction can be based on many sources. Apart from fan fiction based on fictional worlds, there is also fan fiction about actual people such as celebrities, music artists and bands, or historical figures.

characters to another fictional universe) are also popular. Furthermore, you can find just as much quick black-and-white doodles as elaborate coloured drawings and comics that fans worked on for hours on end. This means that fan art can be very aesthetically pleasing with attention to detail, composition and colour, but for most fans—as long as what is depicted is funny, moving or fits their interests—beauty is not the most important factor in their decision to reblog or like a piece of art. Even so, fans do exchange drawing references and post tutorials that might help others to develop their skill.
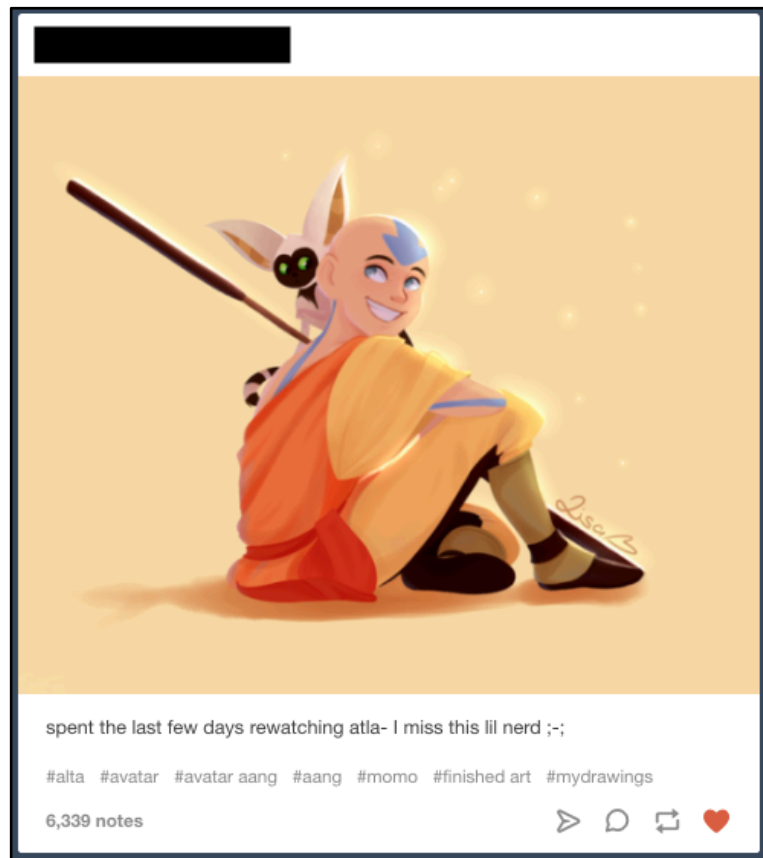

FIGURE VII. FAN ART (DIGITAL DRAWING).

A.5 EDITS, GRAPHICS AND GIFS

A kind of fan practice that is more (but not entirely) unique to Tumblr, is the creation of edits, graphics, and GIFs. Posted via photo sets, edits, graphics and GIFs are fragments or screenshots from the canon material that fans edit in programmes such as Photoshop. For example, they take a picture or still from an episode and edit it by changing the colours and adding text (a caption), then combine it with other stills or pictures that fit the overall topic of the photo set. See for example figure VIII (p.105). In this graphic, a still (in this case from a *Doctor Who* episode) is edited to create an aesthetic blog entry. The creator of the post made colour adjustments, created a background, and added geometrical lines, birds and captions to the post. Together, these elements establish the topic of the post: Clara Oswald's death. The birds in particular add a symbolic layer to the graphic: the character's death involved a raven. The caption beneath the post furthermore cites the sentence the character spoke in the moments leading up to her death, and the fragment 'let me be brave' is, like a message, emphasised by the creator by editing it into the picture.

FIGURE VIII. EXAMPLE OF A GRAPHIC.

FIGURE IX. EXAMPLE OF A STRONGLY EDITED GIF SET.

'Edit' is the term fans use rather loosely for everything that is edited one way or another. This can be a drastically altered graphic or GIF set, like figures VIII and IX, but it can also be a GIF set that has not seen much editing at all, as in figure X below (p. 106). GIFs like these are meant to quite literally re-present a part of a scene—mostly something that the creator found iconic, funny, shocking or moving—that others can quickly 're-watch' as they scroll through their dashboard. Stills (screenshots that do not move) and mangacaps (stills from Japanese comics) are used in the same manner.

FIGURE X. A GIF SET WITHOUT MUCH EDITING.

Fans do explicitly distinguish between graphics and GIFs: whereas GIFs are pictures that move, graphics do not. This is an important distinction, as some people tend to steer away from GIFs because they take longer to load on screen, which makes scrolling harder. Even so, both edited GIFs and graphics are ways for fans to creatively represent themes, characters, events and scenes. Although these posts often stay true to the canon material, fans also use their imagination by putting together seemingly random pictures that they can somehow link to an event, place or character. Fans create for example alternative covers and fan casts, where they seek out pictures of people that fit their image of a certain character— particularly with regard to book adaptations these can differ from the actual actors that were chosen to play the role or can be visualisations of characters that have never seen the screen. Another example is the so-called moodboard: a collection of edited pictures of objects that are put together in one photo set and that (according to the creator) are characteristic to a character or paint an atmospheric picture of something (such as a location) from the fictional world (figure XI, p. 107). Social media AUs (see earlier) can also be classified as such a practice. In addition, users play with fragments and shots from their favourite shows or games in order to suggest alternative relationships, or in order to display new-found parallels between characters or different fictional universes and highlight specific messages and themes (thus working on a more analytic level).
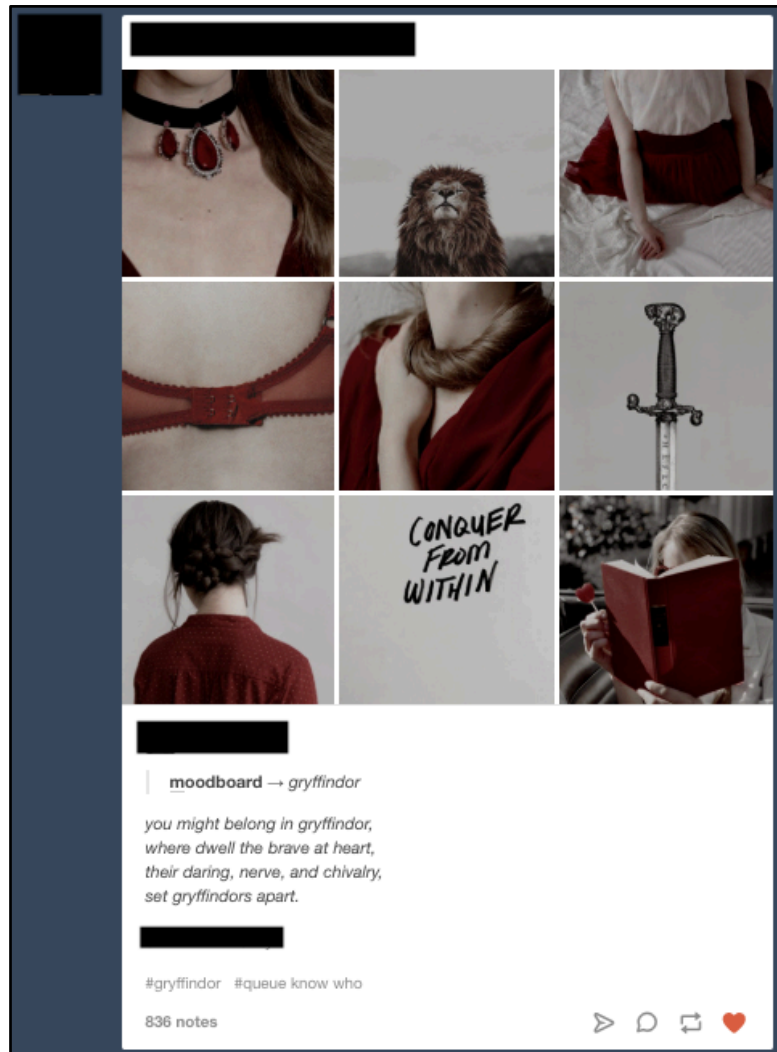
FIGURE XI. EXAMPLE OF A MOODBOARD.

Of course, edits are also a way to simply present something beautiful and display your own skill, which you can improve by using tutorials. Whereas there is attention to skill and aesthetics with regard to fan art, blogs that contain many graphics and edited GIFs are far more focused on the importance of aesthetically pleasing pictures and the skills they reveal. Some of my interviewees even pointed out that what is depicted is not the most important thing, as long as the graphic or GIF set is skilfully made and suits their own style. Indeed, among weblogs that focus on edits, style is important and users are sensitive to trends. My interviewees could point out which edit style they preferred (e.g. colourful and skilful, with thought-through symbolic references) and mentioned for example the current popularity of minimalistic edits with grey tones and pastel shades, or the sudden widespread appearance of moodboards. When they decide to reblog something, they keep in mind these trends as well as the overall style or 'aesthetic' of their weblog in order to make sure everything fits together.

A.6 COSPLAY

Another fan practice that is present on Tumblr is cosplay (short for 'costume play'). In cosplay, fans create costumes of fictional characters in order to dress up as them and act out role plays. On Tumblr, cosplayers give updates about the development of their costumes and they publish photos from

photoshoots in which they cosplay. Cosplay is a fascinating aspect of fan culture that can definitely be found on Tumblr, but only a few of my participants showed interest in it by cosplaying themselves (one person) or occasionally reblogging a post of a cosplayer.

A.7 PROMO ACTIVITIES, REQUESTS AND GIFTS

Tumblr works with a search-and-follow system, where you follow other people's blog activities and gain your own followers. In addition, a reblog or a like on a post adds a 'note' (short for notification) to it, the number of notes being an indicator of the engagement with and reach of a post. Notifications and followers are important for users, albeit to a different extent. Users that create and reblog many graphics and edited GIFs seem to be particularly attentive to the number of notes their posts receive and how many followers they have. A variety of promotional activities has developed amongst these users, such as Tumblr awards, screenshot promos, blog ratings and giveaways. These activities have in common that they have a competitive element in them and help both the original poster (OP) and those who attend the competition gain reach and, with that, followers. For example, the OP can start a Tumblr award competition, screenshot promotion or blog rating. If you reblog the post often (thus spreading the username of the OP via your own blog) you can participate in the competition. The winners have their blog featured in a post that describes why it has won, deserved promotion, or received a certain rating, which reaches all followers of the OP. Giveaways are occasions when the OP creates and publishes something for you on request, for example a piece of fan art or a graphic that contains the URL of your blog, but only if you reblog the post and follow them. Fan art creators can also accept requests or 'open' commissions. This means that they will create a piece of fan art on request, sometimes in exchange for money (the more elaborate the work, the higher the prize).

Once someone has reached a notable number of followers (e.g. 1,000 or 10,000) it is common for them create a 'follow forever' in which they list their favourite weblogs. These weblogs receive free promotion as a celebratory gift. Fans also give each other gifts (for example on their birthday) in the form of a promotion, a graphic, a GIF set, a written one-shot, or a drawing—mostly depicting the receiver's favourite characters or favourite ship.

A.8 TAG GAMES, ASKS AND REACTION GIFS

In all aforementioned practices, there is always some form of interaction between fans. Activities in which the interaction becomes fully explicit, however, are the messages that fans direct to or send to each other. There are different ways to do this. Firstly, usernames can be tagged in (the hashtags of) a post. This is meant to draw the attention of the tagged person, for example because the post contains a message that is directed to them, or because the post contains something the OP wants the tagged person to see because it is funny or something they will like. Tag games are also an example of direct interaction. Similar to a normal tag game you can 'tag' someone in your post to do something. These games often concern lists with personal questions about your fandoms, past experiences, who you are, and what your likes and dislikes are. Once tagged, you have to (if you want to) fill in the list, post it on your blog and then tag someone else. Thus, tag games are a way for people to reveal information about themselves and learn things about others; the posts are often tagged with hashtags such as '#about me' or '#personal'.

Secondly, users can send messages to each other as a kind of email, albeit with a limited number of characters. These messages are referred to as 'asks', because the page through which people can send messages to each other is called the 'ask me everything'-page. When you send an ask to someone, they receive it in their message inbox and can reply to it either privately, or publicly by posting the answer on their weblog. This is how asks have become a post type in themselves (in contrast to the more recent chat function, which works like a private chat system within the interface of your dashboard). Publicly answered asks are common. Not only do asks often contain questions that are relevant or fun to know for more people than the sender, they can also be send anonymously if a user chooses to allow this, which only leaves the option to reply publicly. Asks can be about anything. It can be a question about the opinion someone has about an object of fandom or the latest instalment or episode; it can be an inquiry after someone's well-being; it can be compliments or praise for someone's blog or something they have made; it can be a request or an ask for advice on how to improve certain skills or how to deal with something personal; but it can also be—particularly when it concerns anonymous asks—an ask that voices disagreement, gives criticism on someone's work, or calls the receiver names (so-called hate).

A common way to react (publicly) to asks is via reaction GIFs. A reaction GIF is a moving picture taken from a media text that displays a certain reaction. For example, if someone receives an ask with a compliment, they can react with a reaction GIF that shows a character that reacts delighted to something. Reaction GIFs are an easy tool to help users express themselves and are perceived as a fun and sometimes humorous way to interact with others.

A.9 TOPICALITIES, MEMES AND REAL LIFE ISSUES

Not everything on Tumblr is related to fandom. Although it strongly depends on the user how much this happens, users also post about matters related to real life, such as news items (which can be but is not necessarily news related to their objects of fandom), political developments (mostly related to the United States), personal events, and—surprisingly common—mental health issues. For example, there are users who regularly post updates about things that happen in their daily lives or reblog posts about things they struggle with. Such posts can get very personal and are often tagged as such (e.g. #personal or #about me). My interviewees explained that encountering personal posts of the people they follow can result in feeling like you get to know a person over time.

Topicalities are generally addressed in either an activist way (e.g. a text post that lists the things you can do in order to achieve something or protest against something) or a humorous way. One of my interviewees, Floortje, recalled several moments where topicalities were addressed on Tumblr, one time via one of her favourite shows, *Parks and Recreation*:

> I thought it was really funny, also when for example Donald Trump came into power, one of the writers [of Parks and Recreation] who writes the lead character had written a letter from her [the lead character] to Donald Trump, and that was simply so funny. And then, the fandom, that had been dead for a year, went suddenly like: "Hey, we're still here!" and that's, that's just – that's a really fun fandom.
>
> (…)

Nowadays, also with regard to Trump, there are all these funny videos and stupid comments, say, that sort of laugh the pain away. (...) I can laugh so hard about that, and well, that is something I really like, that they can find the humour in it somehow, whereas they're still stuck with it the next four years.

As Floortje's response shows, fans immediately picked up on something a show writer did in response to a political situation and published it on Tumblr in order to share it with others. The same happens with for instance GIFs that users create from satirical news shows such as *The Daily Show* or *Saturday Night Live*.
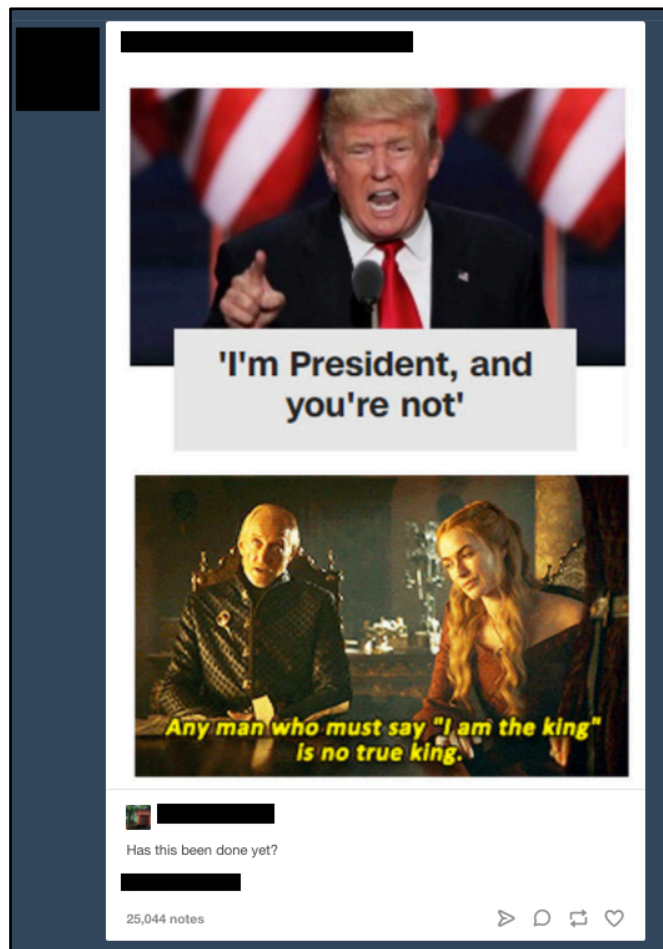

FIGURE XII. EXAMPLE OF A POST THAT INVOLVES TOPICALITY.

Another type of post that can be related to the (online) world outside Tumblr is that of memes. A meme is a kind of public inside joke that spreads fast through social networking sites.[260] Memes can be based on both online and offline matters. A joke, video or picture needs to repeatedly pop up in order for it to become a meme, and as on any other social networking site, you can find widely-known internet memes on Tumblr. In addition, there are memes that develop on Tumblr and are unique to the platform. Fans share and use memes just like other internet users do, but they also tend to link them to their object of fandom (see figure XIII, p. 111).

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[260] Occasionally users also refer to a series of edits with the same topic as being a 'meme'. For example, if someone made a series of graphics about Game of Thrones, they can caption it as 'GoT meme 1/6' (said graphic being the first from the series). Such use of the word 'meme' falls under section 4.1.4—Edits, graphics and GIFs.
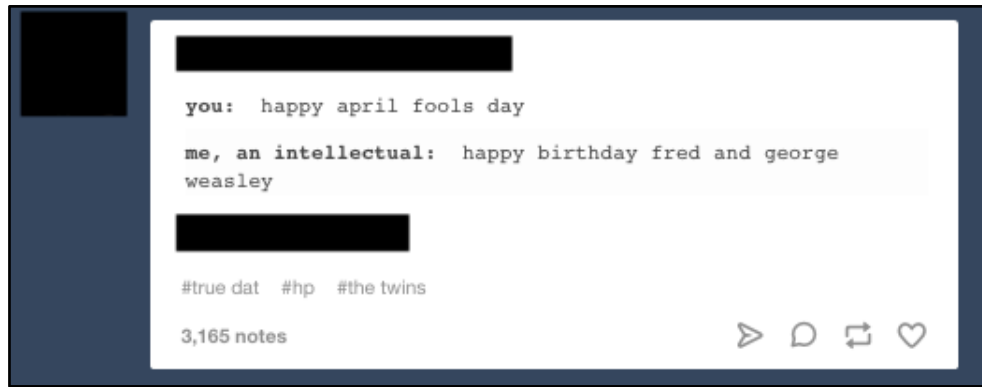
FIGURE XIII. A MEME (YOU: … / ME, AN INTELLECTUAL: …) LINKED TO SOMEONE'S FANDOM.

Memes always carry a comical element to them, but you have to be a frequent user of the internet (or in this case, Tumblr) to fully get the joke—the humour behind a meme is generally hard to explain to outsiders.

APPENDIX B - TYPOLOGY OF THE INTERVIEWEES

After the period of fieldwork ended, six of this study's participants were interviewed about their experiences and activities on Tumblr and their use of the platform in daily life. As mentioned in chapter 1, all interviewees were Dutch, which allowed me to speak to them face to face and visit four of them at their own home—the environment in which they usually go on Tumblr. The interviewees together represent the variety of bloggers and weblogs present amongst my participants.

B.1 THE EDITORS

ISA

Isa (all names are fake pseudonyms) is a 22-year old female university student who lives with her mother. An important hobby of hers is to Photoshop; she started to use the programme in her early teens, sharing her creations online, and over the years developed her skill to such an extent that she now uses it to design posters in a student committee, among other things.

Isa created her Tumblr account in 2010. She had been active on an international Photoshop forum where many people watched the BBC series *Doctor Who* and, interested in both the show and people's creations of the show, Isa sporadically visited Tumblr via the forum to view new content. She started to follow Doctor Who weblogs via a personal Tumblr account and began to reblog their content. By doing so, she gradually became part of the Doctor Who fandom. Later on, she discovered the existence of other fandoms on Tumblr and as her media consumption increased, so did her activity in these fandoms.

For Isa, Tumblr is a place to find inspiration for her creations and share her edits as well as those of others (particularly graphics). She is part of different networks and participates in a variety of promo activities. In other words, she is clearly part of Tumblr's edit culture. Isa sees Tumblr is a leisure activity that brings her relaxation and a community with whom she can talk about shared interests. The contact with others helped her improve her English and being active on Tumblr revealed to her how critical

some people can be towards the shows they watch. When she is online, she makes sure to check her networks, tracked hashtags and inbox. She then scrolls through her dash in a search for inspiration and interesting content.

BENTHE

Benthe (21, female) is a bachelor's student at a University for Applied Sciences (higher professional education or HBO) and lives at her parents. She started her weblog in 2012 and refers to her first year on the platform as being amateurish and chaotic, as she had 'no idea what it was.' During her teens, Tumblr was something she largely used to quell boredom and express her feelings about her favourite shows (which at first were *Harry Potter* and the common combination of *Supernatural*, *Sherlock* and *Doctor Who*)—the platform and people on it functioned as an emotional outlet for Benthe. After a year, she came to understand the platform's structures, joined networks and gained followers, and started to create her own content by means of Photoshop (rather than only reblogging content made by others). Benthe has been active in many fandoms and ultimately became fully part of Tumblr's edit culture, talked to many people whom she sometimes came to consider as friends, and met several people offline. Tumblr made her feel part of a group and amplified her fan experience and helped her to develop (Photoshop) skills that she feels will keep being useful in the future.

In 2016, Benthe lived abroad for five months, which changed her Tumblr behaviour. As her daily routine became different, she grew out of her extreme investment in Tumblr. She was able to take some distance from the platform, and as many of her fellow users were also busy with school and work, she slowly became less active. Even so, she is still active in several networks, still scrolls through her dashboard and posts content (mostly via reblogs) on a regular basis via her queue, and still chats with a few people on a daily basis.

B.2 THE REWATCHER

FLOORTJE

Floortje is a 20-year old female who studies at university. After having had to move house a lot as a child, she now shares an apartment with her older sister. She finds that her busy student life has changed her behaviour with regard to Tumblr—similar to Benthe, Tumblr was particularly important to Floortje during secondary school, as she experienced a lack of people in her daily life to share her fan experiences with. Although Tumblr is now beginning to take a less prominent place in her life, she sees the platform as something that has been very meaningful to her, not in the least because of the friendships it helped her to build. As she explained to me, Tumblr gave her a virtual extension of her own (social) environment and allowed her to perform an extra layer of her identity. It also allowed her to keep up to date with new developments, and it gave her insight into critical readings of media texts and the power of fans to protest against certain things (such as unequal pay between actors or bad writing).

Like Benthe and Isa, Floortje binge-watches many life action series. However, she is not at all concerned with edits and rarely produces her own content; when on Tumblr, she simply scrolls through her dashboard and reblogs content she likes. Also, in contrast to Benthe and Isa, Floortje does so without much of a system; whereas Benthe and Isa have elaborate hashtag systems to organise their posts,

Floortje does not and describes her Tumblr activities as 'chaotic'. She enjoys fan theory and analyses and prefers scene-depicting stills and GIF sets above anything else. Hence 'the rewatcher': scene-depicting posts allow Floortje to rewatch scenes from her favourite series. For her, this also means re-experiencing the emotions she felt when she first watched the scene and being reminded of the time when she first saw it and the people she first saw it with.

When Floortje created a Tumblr account in 2013, she was interested in content about one particular series, but through her encounters with other fandoms her interests diversified. The last couple of years she has also been active in fandoms outside media fandom, such as musical fandom and the Broadway scene.

B.3 THE 'TRADITIONAL' FANS

AMBER

Amber, 24 years old and female, is a master's student at university and majored in English during her bachelor's. She lives together with other students in a so-called student house where she has her own room. I dubbed Amber and Lynn (see below) the 'traditional' fans, not because they are some sort of stereotypical fan or experience Tumblr and fandom in the exact same way, but because their activities and emphasis on what Tumblr is about comes closest to the what is considered traditional fannish behaviour—they enjoy fan fiction, fan art and cosplay; they visit (offline) fan conventions; and they use Tumblr explicitly to explore and extent the stories and characters they came to love. Fandom is for them not necessarily related to Tumblr and has been an integral part of their lives since they were teens. For Amber, this means that she cannot imagine what her life would look like without fandom, for it influenced many aspects of her life, from friends to study choice.

Amber consciously experienced the transition of fandom from platforms like LiveJournal to Tumblr. To her, Tumblr is purely a means to an end—she enjoys fandom, so she followed its move to Tumblr, even though she finds some disadvantages to Tumblr compared to the platforms from the past. In contrast to the first three interviewees, for whom Tumblr was a place that covered something they felt they did not have in their daily lives, many of Ambers 'real life' friends are people she met at conventions and who also have a Tumblr account. When Amber scrolls through her dashboard (which is her main activity on the platform), she often stops to share posts with these friends, and she and her friends sometimes spend time on Tumblr while they are physically together.

One of the things that Tumblr brings to fandom, according to Amber, is the unprecedented amount of content (fan art, fan fiction, discussions, theory). She likes that Tumblr allows you to follow your own preferences (in her case explorations of characters' domestic life) and personally tends to lean towards Tumblr's drawing culture, although she does not produce drawings herself. She does, however, creates fan videos and AMVs (Anime Music Videos) on occasion and she cosplays; most of her creations she also shares on Tumblr. There are several fandoms that she has been part of for years, such as the *Game of Thrones* fandom, and the anime series *Yuri!!! on Ice* has been a particularly important fandom for her ever since shortly after it aired at the end of 2016.

LYNN

Like the others, Lynn (22, female) is a student, but at an MBO college (secondary vocational education). She lives together with her mother and younger siblings in a small apartment. Fandom has been a source of comfort for her; in times of hardship, she could always turn to her favourite characters and stories and receive support from her online friends. Fandom is also something she shares with her mother, who cosplays and visits conventions with her.

Lynn created her Tumblr account in December 2012 and used it to search for content of her favourite ships. When online, she checks her tracked hashtags, scrolls through her dashboard, and chats with others. For Lynn, Tumblr is a place where she can interact with the things (particularly characters) she likes and share ideas and opinions on series and story lines with fellow fans. She enjoys analyses and writes fan fiction as a way to explore dynamics she finds interesting and to create content that is not (or hardly) provided in the canon material. She shares her fics both on Tumblr and the website AO3. As a fan fiction writer, she enjoys Tumblr because it allows her to interact with her readers and (through that) improve her own writing. She has also befriended some of her readers to the point where they sent each other packages via post (for example with fanworks or merchandise) and video chat on a daily basis. Furthermore, Lynn reblogs many scene-depicting GIFs and stills and tends to lean towards Tumblr's drawing culture, although like Amber, she does not produce drawings herself.

B.4 THE GAMER

SAM

Sam is a transgender male of 22 who studies at university and lives at his parents. Sam blogs about different types of media and his weblog and activities cut through different subcultural layers; Sam enjoys reading head canons and fan fiction, to view fan art as well as edits, and he is fan of both animated series and life action media. He is also no stranger to cosplay and fan conventions and several of his (real life) friends also own a Tumblr account. I decided to label him 'the gamer' because of his strong focus on games and gaming fandoms (such as *Mass Effect* and *Overwatch*), which often are a mix of both edit and drawing culture. Tumblr is for Sam a way to be more involved in his fandoms and incorporate them, via the amount of content, into his daily life. At the same time, it has made him more critical towards media.

Sam started with Tumblr in 2011 in an attempt to find more content on *Harry Potter*—a fandom that he lost interest in as his interest in games began to grow. For Sam, Tumblr is unique in that it provides a mixture between news (e.g. world news or updates related to an object of fandom), personal interests and artistic creativity. Scrolling through his dashboard provides him therefore with a daily dose of fun and creativity. Sam explained that Tumblr also is a way for him to find new objects of fandom and follow trends, for example via posts and explicit recommendations of other users. He tracks specific hashtags and, like Benthe and Isa, he uses the hashtag system to organise his posts and maintains a queue to keep the activity on his weblog even.

[Inleiding op het interview (informatie over onderzoek, rechten geïnterviewde, opbouw interview, etc.) niet in appendix opgenomen.]

LEVENSVERHAAL

- Kun je vertellen wie je bent en hoe jouw leven eruitziet?

TUMBLR

INTRO

- Kun je voor mij, in je eigen woorden, Tumblr omschrijven?

- Kun je me meer vertellen over jouw weblog en, als je die hebt, je sideblogs?

    o MOTIVATIES
        - Waar gebruik je je blog / sideblogs voor?

    o KIEZEN VAN URL
        - Hoe ben je op de naam van je url gekomen?
        - Ben je ooit gewisseld van naam? (Wat maakte dat je besloot de naam te veranderen? Wat gebeurde er? Wat voelde je toen?)

    o FOLLOWERS
        - Hoeveel followers heb je?
        - Kun je me iets vertellen over wie je followers zijn?
        - Heb je ook 'mutuals'?

FANDOMS

- Bij welke fandoms zit je?
- Kun je me meer vertellen over deze fandoms (evt. je belangrijkste fandoms)?

- Kun je me iets (meer) vertellen over je favoriete personages?

    o SHIPS
        - Kun je uitleggen wat je bedoelt met…?
        - Welk gevoel geeft dit personage / deze personages / deze ship je?

- Hoe ben je onderdeel geworden van deze fandoms / het [naam] fandom?

VERGELIJKING FANDOMS

- Op welke manier verschillen de fandoms die je zojuist beschreef?

- Kun je me vertellen over fandoms die je leuker of juist minder leuk vindt dan andere fandoms?

  o WAAROM (NIET) LEUK
    - Wat maakt dit fandom voor jou leuker/minder leuk?

  o BEHOREN TOT
    - Hoor je zelf ook bij dit fandom/deze fandoms? Waarom wel/niet?

- Heb je er ooit over nagedacht om een fandom te verlaten?
  o DETAILS
    - Wat gebeurde er?
    - Wat deed je toen?
    - Wat gebeurde er daarna?
    - Welke gevoel gaf dat je?

ONLINE ACTIVITEITEN EN ERVARINGEN

[De volgende vragen gaan over je activiteiten en ervaringen op Tumblr, maar voordat we beginnen wil ik je vragen om in te loggen op je account.]

- Kun je me in zoveel mogelijk detail uitleggen wat je doet wanneer je op Tumblr gaat? (Je mag het laten zien terwijl je het uitlegt.)

  o POSTEN, VOLGEN
    - Wanneer reblog je iets?
    - Hoe bepaal je wie je volgt en wie niet?

  o QUEUE
    - Maak je gebruik van een queue?
    - Waarvoor gebruik je die?

  o HASHTAGS
    - Kun je me iets vertellen over hoe jij hashtags gebruikt?

  o NOTIFICATIES, ACTIVITEITEN CHECKEN
    - Hoe vaak let je op de notes die een post heeft?
    - Wat zeggen die?
    - Kun je je een gelegenheid herinneren waarop een van jouw posts veel notes kreeg? (Welk gevoel gaf dat je? Wat vind je daarvan?)

  o VERLATEN DASHBOARD / BEZOEKEN BLOGS
    - Wanneer verlaat je je dashboard?
    - In welke situaties ga je naar de echte blog-pagina van iemand?

- Wat vind je leuk aan op Tumblr zitten?

- Kun je je een gelegenheid herinneren waarop je sterke gevoelens had over iets terwijl je op Tumblr was?
  o DETAILS

- Kun je me een gedetailleerdere beschrijving geven van wat er gebeurde? / Wat deed je precies?
- Hoe reageerde je? / Wat deed je toen?
- Wat voelde je daarbij? / Hoe voelde je je toen?
- Als je er nu op terugkijkt, wat vind je er dan van?

- Kun je een situatie beschrijven waarin je stemming veranderde door wat je zag of deed op Tumblr?
  - DETAILS (zie hierboven)

- Hoe voel je je meestal nadat je op Tumblr hebt gezeten?

POSTS

[Voorafgaand aan interview uitgekozen → 3 posts totaal]

- Kun je me uitleggen wat we hier zien?
  - CAPTIONS
    - Wat trekt je aandacht / wat valt je op / waar let je op als je dit zo ziet?
  - PERSONAGES / SHIPS
    - Kun je meer vertellen over dit personage / deze personages?

- Kun je beschrijven wat je voelt als je zo naar deze post kijkt?

- Waarom heb je deze post gekozen om te laten zien?
  - MOTIVATIE VOOR POSTEN
    - Is dat ook waarom je de post hebt gereblogt / gepost?

- Is er nog iets anders wat je over deze post zou willen zeggen?

DAGELIJKS LEVEN

ROUTINES

- Hoe vaak gedurende de dag denk je aan de dingen of personages waar je fan van bent?
  - (ROL/INVLOED TUMBLR)

- Op welke momenten van de dag zit je normaal gesproken op Tumblr?
  - DETAILS (ELKE DAG, RITME?)
    - Hoeveel uur per dag zit je gemiddeld op Tumblr?

  - WEEKEND VS. DOORDEWEEKS
    - Kun je beschrijven wat de verschillen zijn tussen doordeweekse dagen en dagen in het weekend?

- Zou je voor mij zo gedetailleerd mogelijk een moment kunnen omschrijven waarop je vaak op Tumblr gaat?

- o LOCATIE/OMGEVING
  - ▪ Waar ben je als je op Tumblr gaat? → Kun je dit laten zien?
  - ▪ In welke setting ga je het liefst op Tumblr? Waarom?
  - ▪ Wat voor gevoel heb je, als je aan deze setting denkt?
  - ▪ Kun je een setting beschrijven waarin je liever niet op Tumblr gaat? Kun je me daar iets meer over vertellen?

- o AANWEZIGHEID ANDEREN
  - ▪ Hoe voel je je als er anderen bij zijn wanneer je op Tumblr gaat?

- o APPARATEN
  - ▪ Wat voor apparaten gebruik je om op Tumblr te gaan?
  - ▪ Wat zijn de verschillen tussen op Tumblr zitten op je telefoon en op Tumblr zitten op je computer of laptop? *(tablet als extra optie)*
  - ▪ Hoe verandert dit jouw ervaring van wat je ziet?

CONTEXT

- Welke andere dingen doe je terwijl je op Tumblr zit?

  - o ONLINE + OFFLINE
    - ▪ Heb je Tumblr wel eens open staan in een venster of tabblad terwijl je andere dingen doet op je computer of telefoon?
    - ▪ Is er wel eens iets anders wat je doet, offline, terwijl je op Tumblr zit?

- Kun je je een gelegenheid herinneren waarbij je langer op Tumblr bleef dan je had gepland of gewild?
  - o DETAILS
    - ▪ Heb je meer voorbeelden van zulke momenten?
    - ▪ Kun je je een situatie herinneren waarin je de tijd vergat? Waar kwam dat door, denk je?

- Wat vinden anderen, zoals je familie en je vrienden, van je weblog?
  - ▪ Wat vind je daarvan?
  - ▪ Kun je me daar meer over vertellen?
  - ▪ Hoe reageerde je / wat deed je toen?
  - o (ALS ZE ER NIET VANAF WETEN)
    - ▪ Is er een reden dat ze er niet vanaf weten?
    - ▪ Kun je me daar meer over vertellen? / Wat vind je daarvan?

[We hebben de meeste dingen nu besproken, maar er zijn nog twee vragen die ik zou willen stellen.]

- Wat hebben je fandoms / heeft fandom jou gebracht in je leven?

- Tot slot: Wat verandert Tumblr (heeft Tumblr veranderd) aan jouw ervaring van de dingen waar je fan van bent?

WRAPPING UP QUESTIONS

- Zijn er nog dingen die we niet besproken hebben, maar waarvan je het idee hebt dat ze wel belangrijk zijn voor het onderzoek?

- Is er verder nog iets wat je zou willen toevoegen aan wat er tot nu toe is gezegd?

[Rest van de wrap up (o.a. wat mensen vonden van het interview, of ze nog suggesties voor mij hebben m.b.t. het interview) niet in appendix opgenomen.]