

Introduction

In my book *Publishers, Readers, and Digital Engagement*,¹ I explored how young people participate in book-related sites online – from participatory book-reviewing sites such as Random Buzzers; to fan sites such as Twilight Saga; to a co-created series such as The Amanda Project, in which the publisher asked readers to contribute storylines for forthcoming books in the series – and how in turn these processes commodify young people. This Element starts where that book ended, and focuses on the complex relationship between fans and the “owners” of their fandom: in this case, examining *Harry Potter* fans across transmedia landscapes, and their relationships with the rights holders, J. K. Rowling and Warner Bros. Ownership in this context becomes an encumbered term. Corporate owners have a very clear idea of ownership, backed up by an established system of copyright law and the financial means to support lawsuits. Fans certainly have their own claims of ownership, and while they may lack financial means to challenge a corporate behemoth such as Warner Bros., as a united fan community² they increasingly have the power of social media platforms to influence decisions. When conflicts arise, each side has much to lose.

Genre is both a construct and a marketing tool. In children’s literature, genre boundaries are connected to developmental stages, and to children’s stages in school, but are also governed by markets and salability. For example, after the publication of S. E. Hinton’s (1967) book *The Outsiders*, generally recognized as the first work of young adult (YA) fiction published in the United States, YA quickly became a burgeoning genre of “realist fiction” that was closely tied to social change, covering issues such as sex, war, and drug abuse.³ Thirty years later, J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series was a genre-pushing series, elevating the “fantasy” genre to prominence for those who read the books. Within the overarching genre of

¹ M. Martens, *Publishers, Readers, and Digital Engagement* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

² H. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

³ Martens, *Publishers*.

children's literature, fantasy is a sub-genre with especially fluid boundaries. The *Harry Potter* books are crossover titles, which means that even though they were initially published as books for young people, their appeal extends across a wide demographic. Arguably, *Harry Potter* was a genre-busting series, with the books behaving more like works of adult fiction than like books published for young readers. Beginning with *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in 1997 in the United Kingdom (and in 1998 in the United States, where it was published as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*), J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books changed the publishing landscape for young people in terms of sales figures, best-seller status, and book length, from the first book's appearance in 1997 to the last in 2007. The first book spent 442 weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list, and as of September 2017, it was the fifth most read book on Amazon.com.⁴ In fact, the series prompted the need for a separate children's best-seller list at the *New York Times* because it constantly took over the first four entries on the combined list, and subsequently created a need for a separate children's "series" list.⁵ As a crossover series, it appeals to a demographic beyond its original intended audience of children, and, with over 500 million copies sold, it is the best-selling series of all time.⁶ The individual books have topped best-selling books lists such as a 2016 one by *The Guardian* Data Blog, on which the seven *Harry Potter* books hold places in the top ten spots, with three spots lost to the following "adult" titles: no. 1, *The DaVinci Code* by Dan Brown, no. 5, *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E. L. James,

⁴ *New York Times*, "Children's series," September 24, 2017, www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2017/09/24/series-books/?action=click&contentCollection=Books&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F®ion=Header&module=ArrowNav&version=Right&pgtype=Reference

⁵ D. Garner, "Ten years later, Harry Potter vanishes from the best-seller list," *New York Times*, May 1, 2008, <https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/05/01/ten-years-later-harry-potter-vanishes-from-the-best-seller-list/?mcubz=3&r=0>

⁶ J. Weiss, "Harry Potter becomes best-selling book series in history with more than 500 million copies sold worldwide," *Syfy Wire*, February 2, 2018, www.syfy.com/syfywire/harry-potter-becomes-best-selling-book-series-in-history-with-more-than-500-million-copies

and no. 9, *Angels and Demons* by Dan Brown.⁷ Adding pirated copies and books that have been shared, either via libraries or between readers, to the number of sold books means that *Harry Potter* is probably the most read series of all time. Nicolette Jones, the children's books editor of the London *Sunday Times*, noted that *Harry Potter*'s impact on literature and the cultural consciousness has been pervasive.⁸ Even our language has changed, with words from the book, such as “muggle,” added to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Before J. K. Rowling, the best-selling children's author in the United Kingdom was Enid Blyton, who died in 1968. Blyton was well known for many series including *The Famous Five* and *The Secret Seven*.⁹ Yet by 2016, while the *Harry Potter* books took up top ten slots in *The Guardian*'s Data Blog, books by Enid Blyton did not appear on the list.

The *Harry Potter* series coincided with a boom in Internet use. FanFiction.net started in October 1998, which was fortuitous timing, as *Harry Potter* was the perfect vehicle for online fandom. Websites independently made by young fans served as the best kind of peer-to-peer marketing for the books initially, and later for the movies as well. According to Murray, “the first *Harry Potter* book had built its audience through extensive word-of-mouth in Internet-enabled forums such as chat rooms and electronic message boards rather than through corporate-coordinated publicity.”¹⁰ These were the ur-fan sites, later replaced by professional and corporate-owned sites, as we will see herein.

As a contemporary blockbuster appealing to boys and girls, children and adults, *Harry Potter* is the ultimate transmedia property. Twenty years after

⁷ DataBlog, “The top 100 bestselling books of all time: How does *Fifty Shades of Grey* compare?” *The Guardian*, August 9, 2012, www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/aug/09/best-selling-books-all-time-fifty-shades-grey-compare

⁸ N. Jones, “The *Harry Potter* effect: A discussion on how the *Harry Potter* books have changed the landscape of children's literature and permeated our cultural consciousness,” *Royal Society of Literature*, November 23, 2017, <https://rsliterature.org/library-article/the-harry-potter-effect/>

⁹ Jones, “*Harry Potter* effect.”

¹⁰ S. Murray, “‘Celebrating the story the way it is’: Cultural studies, corporate media and the contested utility of fandom,” *Continuum*, 18 (2004), 16.

the first book's initial publication, *Harry Potter's* segment of the entertainment marketplace remains significant, as it spans multiple media platforms: books, film, theater, licensed merchandise, an amusement park, festivals, a play, a movie-studio/museum, a traveling exhibition originating at the British Library, and academic work including university courses, publications, and conferences. Because of the world-building within the series, *Harry Potter* lends itself to fan participation on a large scale, and its audience is active like no other.

Harry Potter's appeal stretches across a wide demographic, from newly-reading children to adults, in part because Harry and his friends grow up over the course of the series. For some early readers, reading a *Harry Potter* book is a sign of accomplishment – a proudly carried badge of literacy. Ebooks allow adult fans to read the books privately, without having to be embarrassed about visibly reading “children’s” literature. The first readers of the books, who grew up experiencing the publication of nearly a book a year, matured along with the characters. This sets the series apart from other popular series – such as the Stratemeyer Syndicate’s *Nancy Drew* mystery stories, in which Nancy Drew ages only two years during the series’ entire seventy-four-year course – which tend to be read by a specific demographic of reader in terms of age and gender. In the first book, Harry is an eleven-year-old child; the series follows him through his childhood and teen years, and then concludes with an epilogue featuring adult Harry with children of his own. While many readers were able to grow up along with Harry, the epilogue is much contested. According to Lesley Goodman, some fans “considered it a betrayal of the fictional universe that the only details important enough to appear in the epilogue are marriages and children,” and indeed, the epilogue primarily describes marriages between Harry and Ginny, Ron and Hermione, and what they named their children.¹¹ Further, “while many fans have defended the epilogue against these charges, explaining why it did not fail the fictional universe, rejecting the epilogue has

¹¹ L. Goodman, “Disappointing fans: Fandom, fictional theory, and the death of the author,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, 48 (2015), 670.

nonetheless created an entire genre of Harry Potter fan fiction, labeled EWE: ‘Epilogue, What Epilogue?’¹²

Another reason for the wide readership is the rich world-building that exists within the books, which makes the series appealing to virtually any reader. This world-building also lends itself exceptionally well to fandoms and fan fiction – and, as we will see later, a complicated relationship between owners and fans. Whether it is magic, orphans, or the classic battle of good versus evil, there is something in the series for nearly everyone, and arguably it is not just the world-building that gives the *Harry Potter* story longevity.

Harry Potter fan studies are situated in a larger realm of fan scholarship and, like the fandom itself, exist across a large ecology of activity – from fan fiction, to participating in festivals, to political activism (in the name of Harry). The balancing of fan agency with corporate control has been explored before, as in television-based fan studies by Henry Jenkins¹³ or Camille Bacon-Smith,¹⁴ or Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture*,¹⁵ in which he explores what happens when analog media formats collide with new online participatory opportunities. While active audiences existed pre-Internet – for example, Tilley¹⁶ describes how twentieth-century comic fans wrote to comic creators to suggest storylines and criticize content, and Pearson describes angry fans engaged in letter writing when *Star Trek* creator Rod Serling canceled the series in 1962¹⁷ – online active audiences are far easier to see, track, study, and engage.

According to Plante, Roberts, Reysen, and Gerbasi, belonging to fan culture “can have a potentially deep and meaningful impact on our values,

¹² Ibid. ¹³ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.

¹⁴ C. Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of the Popular Myth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

¹⁵ H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ C. Tilley, “Children and comics: Young readers take on the critics.” In J. P. Danky and J. L. Baughman, eds., *Protest on the Pages: Essays on Print and the Culture of Dissent since 1865* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015).

¹⁷ R. Pearson, “Fandom in the digital era,” *Popular Communication*, 8 (2010), 84–95.

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identity, and potentially, our behavior.”¹⁸ According to Tosenberger’s definition, fan fiction “utilizes pre-existing characters and settings from a literary or media text,” and the world built by Rowling provides endless opportunities for expansion.¹⁹ The *Star Wars* series is one of similar scale in terms of world-building, transmedia, and fan participation, and it also has multiple similarities in terms of content – something which has not escaped fan attention. A Google search for ‘Harry Potter versus Star Wars’ brings up an abundance of both fan-created and professional content comparing plot similarities between the two franchises: from YouTube videos, to memes, to blog postings. A SparkNotes blog post by Maddy Aaron interprets plot elements of the *Star Wars* movies through a *Harry Potter* lens.²⁰ Another blog post on the Digital Spy site argues that the *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* plots are identical, starting with “orphan[s] fighting evil with pointy sticks.”²¹

Indeed, the books follow in a long tradition of children’s literature in which children successfully act on their own – without parental intervention. Such children abound across Western children’s literature: Astrid Lindgren’s *Pippi Longstocking*, Roald Dahl’s *James and the Giant Peach*, C. S. Lewis’s *Narnia* books, Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy, and Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events* collection. Indeed, in the classic stories, from “Cinderella” to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the hero’s parents are more likely to be absent or dead than cruel or incompetent. In fact, it’s the removal of the adults’ protective presence that kickstarts

¹⁸ C. N. Plante, S. E. Roberts, S. Reysen, and K. C. Gerbasi, “‘One of us’: Engagement with fandoms and global citizenship identification,” *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 3 (2014), 61.

¹⁹ C. Tosenberger, “Homosexuality at the online Hogwarts: Harry Potter slash fanfiction,” *Children’s Literature*, 36 (2008), 185.

²⁰ M. Aaron, “So you haven’t seen *Star Wars* . . . A *Harry Potter* geek’s guide to a galaxy far, far away,” November 10, 2015, <http://community.sparknotes.com/2015/11/10/so-you-havent-seen-star-wars-a-harry>

²¹ M. Hill, “16 reasons why *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* are secretly EXACTLY the same: May the ‘orphan fighting evil with magic pointy sticks’ be with you,” *Digital Spy*, January 12, 2016, www.digitalspy.com/movies/star-wars/feature/a779720/16-reasons

the story, so the orphan can begin her or his “triumphant rise.”²² This aligns also with Vladimir Propp’s functions of dramatis personae, specifically, function no. 1: “One of the members of a family absents himself from home.” Propp explains that such absences can occur with a parent leaving home (for example, to go to work) or the death of a parent, or when the younger person “absents” him- or herself.²³

The character of Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger’s 1951 *The Catcher in the Rye* provides another example, and that book was published as adult fiction despite its young protagonist. In the *Harry Potter* series, courageous acts are generally based on Harry and his friends subverting adult authority and breaking rules, whether it is Harry illegally using magic at the Dursleys’ home or the trio of Harry, Ron, and Hermione sneaking around Hogwarts at night, often in areas whose names forbid entry, such as the “Forbidden Forest” or the “Restricted Section” of the library.

Since *Harry Potter*, there have been other blockbuster series for young people – notably the *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer (the last book, *Breaking Dawn*, was published in 2008) or the *Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins (the last of which was published in 2010). In recent years, online fandoms for young people have greatly proliferated. Digital tools have blurred lines in the field between “authors,” “readers,” and “publishers,” which means that authors now have to market their own works:²⁴ they now have an intrinsic role in connecting with and maintaining relationships with fans by using social media to generate and build fan support for their own works. The most successful YA titles quickly transition to multiple platforms and are optioned for film or television. For example, Maggie Stiefvater, author of the best-selling series *The Raven Cycle*, which as of this writing is being made into a television series, is very active on multiple social media platforms, and even provides a guide for fans on where to find

²² J. Just, “The parent problem in young adult lit,” *New York Times*, April 1, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/04/04/books/review/Just-t.html?pagewanted=all

²³ V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd edn. (Austin, TX, and London: University of Texas Press, 1968), 26.

²⁴ See Martens, *Publishers* for an in-depth discussion.

her online.²⁵ Another blockbuster YA author, John Green (author of *The Fault in Our Stars*, 2012), is well known as a YouTube star of videos in which he and his brother Hank Green post as the Vlogbrothers.²⁶ They also have an educational YouTube series called Crash Course.²⁷ Stiefvater and Green's efforts serve to keep fans engaged in between book releases. Among these online communities, *Harry Potter* fans may well be the most numerous, the most varied, and the most loyal to a series. In order to compare *Harry Potter* with other recent YA blockbusters, a comparison chart of activity across Fanfiction.net, Archive of Our Own, Reddit, and Twitter is shown in Table 1.

In each case, the *Harry Potter* series attracts more fans and activity. Typically, fandoms around blockbuster series run their course. Even the enormous fandom around the *Twilight Saga* has faded, and Hachette's *Twilight Saga* site²⁸ now exists mostly as an extended advertisement for the series. But *Harry Potter* fandom continues strong, more than twenty years after publication of the first book in the series.

Rowling's rich world-building within the series creates seemingly endless opportunities for transmedia experiences – and for multi-dimensional academic analysis such as I undertake here. As the last book in the series was published in 2007, aging *Harry Potter* fans lend a new dimension to the study as well. As evidenced by the sites explored herein, *Harry Potter* fan culture is a way of life. In analyzing the multiple dimensions of *Harry Potter* fandom, this Element takes a holistic look at the participatory culture of the *Harry Potter* fandom experience, exploring three interconnected arenas: (1) online fan sites and social media extensions thereof; (2) unofficial, unauthorized *Harry Potter* festivals; and (3) fan activism.²⁹ Together, these discussions examine fans' participation, from the digital world to the physical world and

²⁵ M. Stiefvater, "About," Tumblr, 2018, <http://maggie-stiefvater.tumblr.com/about>

²⁶ Vlogbrothers [podcast], "Featured," YouTube, n.d., www.youtube.com/user/vlogbrothers/featured

²⁷ J. Green et al. "About," *Crash Course*, n.d., <https://thecrashcourse.com/about>

²⁸ www.thetwilight saga.com/ ²⁹ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.

Table 1 Comparative fan engagement across multiple series (2018)

	Harry Potter	Twilight	H
Fanfiction.net: book community and forums	8,727 communities 1,685 forums	3,917 communities 702 forums	2 3
Archive of Our Own: fan fics	192,248	13,104	1
Reddit	r/harrypotter 530,000 members www.reddit.com/r/harrypotter/wiki/megathread	r/twilight 2,400 members www.reddit.com/r/twilight	r. 1 w
Official author’s Twitter account and number of followers	https://twitter.com/jk_rowling?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor 14,500,000 @jkrowling	https://twitter.com/_StephenieMeyer?lang=en* 8,416 @_StephenieMeyer *Deactivated in 2010	N

back, and at the same time reveal the delicate balance between fans and corporations, both of whom are deeply invested in the franchise.

My methods are qualitative and include the following techniques:

- (1) observations (online and face-to-face) of fan sites and festivals;
- (2) interviews with fans, including writers of fan fiction;³⁰ an organizer of a Potterfest in Kent, Ohio; an organizer of the Harry Potter Festival in Odense, Denmark; an editor of *The Bookseller*, the British trade journal for the publishing industry;³¹ the president of Kent State's Harry Potter Alliance (HPA); and a staff member at the HPA's national (US) office;
- (3) close readings and content analysis of *Harry Potter*-related social media, including Facebook, Pottermore, PottermoreForum, Reddit, and Twitter;³² fan sites such as Pottermore; and websites of various Harry Potter festivals, including the Harry Potter Festival Odense;³³
- (4) information provided by Alexa Internet about the "popularity" of fan sites.

In addition, media coverage in newspapers and social media, blogs, and memes from the US and Denmark, as well as articles from the book trade, contributed to the findings herein.

The first section of this Element describes the context and theoretical frameworks that support a multidimensional analysis of the Harry Potter experience, including (1) fan agency, corporate (and fan) ownership, and conflicts with participation; (2) literary celebrity (as Rowling is perhaps the ultimate contemporary literary celebrity); (3) Bourdieu's field theory; (4)

³⁰ K. W., K. E., and O. P. are adult fans interviewed herein.

³¹ Her US counterpart at *Publishers Weekly* did not respond to requests for an interview.

³² For Twitter data, initially, close readings of Twitter following #Pottermore clearly demonstrated fans' displeasure. Later, a colleague, Emad Khazraee, used the Personal Zombie application to search Twitter for #Pottermore. This resulted in a data set of 7,062 tweets between September 14, 2015 and October 2, 2015. Tweets were then categorized around the themes that emerged, and analyzed.

³³ <https://magiskedageodense.dk/>