YOU ARE NOT ALONE. THE EMERGENCE OF FAN COMMUNITIES AROUND USER-GENERATED CONTENT: A Comparative Analysis

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Introduction

In 1982, *Time* magazine featured ‘The Computer’ as the *Person of the Year*. Although this distinction had been given in the past to other unnamed, more abstract winners (e.g. The American Women in 1975), this was the first and only time a machine won the distinction. This was mainly because of the numerous innovations the computer brought when introduced into the mainstream market that year.

Even more unusual was the fact that the recipient of the 2006 distinction was ‘You’. This choice was based on the spreading popularity of websites and platforms like Napster, Wikipedia, YouTube, MySpace, Facebook and the rapid growth of the blogosphere. These platforms enabled ‘you’ (meaning every person with internet access) to engage in a different, digital world, full of capabilities of expressing yourself and putting your creativity to the test with a potentially worldwide audience judging you.

This creativity has been a subject of numerous debates, discussions and research (academic or not). Media workers reacted initially negatively (Caldwell 283-284), expressing rejection towards user-generated content. On the contrary, numerous companies and conglomerates embraced this practice for many reasons. For example, they proclaimed contests, calling users to create their own videos, and users – hoping to win some recognition – responded by offering free labour and doing a job that normally would have cost money, all that for promises of wealth and fame. Also, many television shows, like *The World’s Funniest Moments* (2008-ongoing), turned to the Internet for content, often showcasing some of the most popular videos of that time. However, what remains arguably the most important result of this practice, is the fact that it pushed companies to embrace crowdsourcing and start including it in their strategies.

After this user-generated content started to circulate online, communities began emerging around it. Online hubs came into being that anyone could participate in and share content, whether videos, information, articles and many more. Wikipedia, one of the biggest online communities, is a very relevant example here. However, apart from communities of utilitarian and informative objects, fan communities also found a fertile ground to evolve. Fandom and user activities revolved around it had now some new ways of spreading across the globe. In addition, two of the most popular –in my
view- categories of fan productivity, original content (like fan-made videos) and streaming (a –usually– live stream of a game or other content with commentary from the streamer) are some of the most discussed topics on online fan communities.

This thesis deals with the emergence of fan communities around user-generated content. I will examine two case studies dealing with users and their transition to productivity through the use of contemporary technology, and characters and events from popular culture. More specifically, I will analyze the Twitch Plays Pokémon stream as a case study for the ‘streaming’ category, and the DEATH BATTLE! series as a case study for the ‘original content’ category. The main questions of the thesis are how communities emerge around freely distributed, user-generated material on the Internet, what are their characteristics, and how platforms allow and encourage them to do so.

In the book Ordinary People and the Media: The Demotic Turn, Graeme Turner points out the lack of significant research in the field of user-generated content, criticizing that “[there is found] almost nothing written about, and very little empirical research which examines, what use ‘actual’ ordinary people might make” (6). Truth be told, things are not that bad. There has been some research on the matter, although since user-generated content is a contemporary topic still in development, there will often be new cases to be studied and new areas that call for shedding of light. Academics like Matt Hills and Henry Jenkins have studied fan cultures for many years. Books like Textual Poachers (1992) by Jenkins, The Adoring Audience (1992) by Lisa A. Lewis, and Fan Cultures (2002) by Hills have been reprinted constantly, and been discussed often among media and fan culture theorists, followed by later releases like Convergence Culture (2006) by Jenkins and Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage (2008) by Axel Bruns. Jenkins and Hills have been continuously researching issues on fan creativity, expression and communities. It is not an overstatement to say that Jenkins is the ‘pioneer’ of fan studies, since he has been among the first to pinpoint the importance of studying fans and their culture, followed by a number of other academics like Hills, John Fiske, Camille Bacon-Smith and Lisa A. Lewis. Their engagement with user-generated content and user productivity has sparked interest in academia, with many researches and papers being published in the two decades following Textual Poachers.
However, a big part of this work provides a focus on written fanfiction, fan art and/or television and its fannish extensions on online discussions. From my observations, I have noticed that fan-made audiovisual artefacts of the current decade have not been researched thoroughly, especially not in matters of community building and bond strengthening, and even more specifically there has been not thorough examination of produsage matters, community strengthening and fan cultures. Online communities have never before been more active, with new content being produced on a daily basis. And since these are online communities we are talking about, that means that they are comprised by a large number of members from all over the world; it is even likely that anyone might have participated in such an online productive community, even as a ‘passerby’. Moreover, although fans had always been creative and full of inspiration for their own unofficial additions to a narrative, nowadays they have a vast array of online tools to create, narrate and spread their content, and unite fans under their banner.

With this analysis, I hope to contribute covering the gap, offering a perspective to a contemporary topic, positioning myself in the body of current research on fan cultures and user-generated content, and providing an underlining on the building, shaping, spread and maintenance of online communities based around fan-made projects.

At first, a brief history of media's phases and their relationship with production will be introduced, to examine how media progressed from the era of print and the first media owners as the only valid and true communicators, to the contemporary age of convergence and grassroots production, so to indicate that productivity now is not a benefit exclusively available to few, but is a process that, with the right tools, anyone can engage with, and that this productivity allows for fans of any media franchise to come together and celebrate their fandom. The two aforementioned categories, original content and streaming, will be the main focus in which the examination will take place, to see how communities are built around this kind of user-generated content. A case study will be picked for each one of them and analyzed thoroughly by performing a platform analysis, according to the way platforms are presented in José van Dijck’s work (2013), in order to see how these communities shape, function and maintain themselves on an interconnected, mediated level. Then an institutional analysis will take place, drawing concepts from the works of Axel Bruns (2008; 2013), John Fiske and Matt Hills (2013), to
examine the social elements of fan productivity, and after proposing my own fan categorization, I will apply all of them to the case studies. *DEATH BATTLE!* will be the case study for the original content, and *Twitch Plays Pokémon* for streaming. In the conclusion, I will summarize my findings, look at my limitations, and provide ground for future research.
Part 1: You are not alone

1.1. Media and ‘imagined communities’

When print was invented in the 15th century, not only it brought a revolution in the process of communication, but it also set a model of media production unbeknownst in the past. Printing machines were expensive to construct and own, therefore they were owned only by those who could afford them and who had the know-how to operate them. Those people could be described as the first media owners: they could reproduce the same message an infinite number of times and distribute it to a potentially infinite audience.

Western religion was closely associated with press and mass media – it is known that the Bible was the first book printed by Johannes Gutenberg. But where Christianism really took advantage of print was on the 31st of October 1517, when Luther printed his objections to Catholicism and posted them on the door of the Augustinian chapel of Wittenberg (Thompson 103). With the use of print, Luther spread his ideas easier than he would have done by handwriting, helping him strengthen Protestantism by addressing it to a wider audience. Furthermore, when Luther printed more of his works in the German language and not in Latin, he contributed to a demystification of western religion (Thompson 103-105). Until then, people of the Germanic area had to attend liturgy and pray in a language only the educated elite knew. By reading the Bible and other religious texts in their own language, readers, for the first time, realized that there exists a community consisting of other people that spoke the same language with them and was defined by common traits and interests. Although they possibly would never meet every single member of this community, they knew they existed, therefore they were not alone. This is one example of what went to be called an ‘imagined community’. At this point, I should describe what an imagined community is. Benedict Anderson defined a nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” which “is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6-7). So, anyone can be a member of this community, provided that they believe it. Still, though, the printing methods were in the hands of only a selected few.
Until the beginnings of the 20th century, print was the only medium capable of addressing a potentially infinite audience. That changed with the introduction of electronic media. Radio broadcasting, film and, later, television started what is referred by Nottas (51) as the “first phase of modernity.” The content production of these inventions was still held by a specific elite, but what changed now was that all three of them could appeal to an even larger audience. While print supposed literacy as a requirement for someone to understand its content, with electronic media any person audiovisually able-bodied could receive their message. Moving pictures and sound could be understood by anyone adept at the spoken word, although that does not mean that the message perceived would be the same for all (but reception is a different issue).

With the introduction of the Internet and the improvement of connections all over the world some years later, the potentially infinite audience of other media was now more linked and more accessible. Every person with a relatively fast Internet connection could participate in an ever-growing community. Especially today with the existence of countless fora, groups and online communities, one can find easily a community consisted of people with same interests, preferences or worries, and participate. New technologies and tools have made communication and information sharing much faster and much easier. As Clay Shirky claims, the simplicity and rapidness of these tools have assisted group formations. Although Shirky’s remarks are also focused on communities that hold regular meetings and use the Web as just a method of formation, spread and perseverance, that does not mean that the same remarks cannot be made for Web-exclusive communities.

The creation of an imagined community has risen to prominence nowadays. Every time you read a comment online and press the ‘like’ or ‘dislike’ button, every time you share a video, every time you register to a forum, you are a member of such a community: one that you will never meet all its members, but know that they exist. You are not alone in your fandom.

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Although the very first motion picture screenings took place in the late 1890’s, film was still in a premature, experimental form.
What do we need to know?

After admitting that these communities indeed exist and thrive, I cannot help but wonder how they can be understood. It is obvious that online communities are different than the ones that exist in the ‘real world’, mainly because –and as their name implies- these communities are being developed online, making use of the tools that the Internet offers them. Another main difference is that such communities are not based on language like the ones suggested by Anderson, but on fandom and fan preferences. Therefore, although it is already obvious that someone is not alone in fandom, what is not clear is how these communities are shaped and developed, and how they evolve and grow, even more when user-generated content becomes involved. Another aspect not clearly defined, has to do with the ways these online communities function in terms of organization, collaboration and authority since, in a non-material environment traditional practices of government might not be expected. And what is happening when these communities proceed into production, and create their (user-generated) content, now that production tools are not an exclusiveness of few? How can we study them and get a grasp of what is happening?

So, can we grasp these communities by drawing on existing theories and literature of do we need to reconsider existing concepts? I will attempt to find out in the following chapters.
Part 2: Theoretical framework and methodology

2.1. You are not alone

Let’s imagine a bazaar. A bazaar is a place where multitudes of sellers stand, each demonstrating his/her merchandise, while shouting loud to attract customers. Enter today’s age, and the digital bazaar. YouTube and other video sharing platforms function like a digital bazaar, a parallelism first suggested by Müller (59). A place in which anyone tries to attract ‘customers’ (meaning viewers) to his/her own ‘merchandise’ (meaning content). A space in which common, everyday language is used, thus becoming the norm. Users are chatting informally, friendly, much more differently than other media. And this helps into the formation of a common group, a community, a place of belonging. It is like someone goes out and meets with friends. Especially in particular circles or groups of interest, one can feel at ease.

It has been claimed by Toby Miller (1) that “we are in a crisis of belonging, a population crisis, of who, what, when, and where. More and more people feel as though they do not belong. More and more people are seeking to belong, and more and more people are not counted as belonging.” However, I tend not to fully agree. We might indeed seek to belong, but a clarification has to be made: we all belong someplace, even if we do not know our fellow ‘mates’. And, although, in real life it is not always easy to find others like us, we know that by the use of electronic media we can have access and link with others that belong to where we do, much like an ‘upgraded’ version of Benedict Anderson’s imagined community mentioned in the previous chapter. “Geographically isolated fans can feel much more connected to the fan community and home-ridden fans enjoy a new level of acceptance” (Jenkins, Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers 142). The ‘bazaars’ are plenty, and anyone can find something that he/she likes. As I documented in the previous chapter, with the multiplication of channels and modes of communication, media industry “has evolved from a predominantly homogeneous mass communication medium, anchored around national television and radio networks, to a diverse media system combining broadcasting with narrowcasting to niche audiences” (Castells 127).

One element that should not be forgotten when talking about online communities, though, is the ‘social’; namely what happens when sociality and socialization take
over media. Facebook, YouTube and other platforms are called ‘social media’ for a reason. In this social environment, on many occasions people appear more and more as their true selves, and that is because today’s social media allow a connection not available previously. People, by ‘wearing’ their actual social identity, can link and get to know even more people and create communities around their interests. Facebook’s founder, Mark Zuckerberg said:

You have one identity... Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity. The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly. (qtd. in van Dijck 178)

Now, I will see how this diverse media system allows for the audience -the fandom- to connect, create content and distribute it, by examining characteristics of the platforms offered to them, and of the communities they formulate. This essay’s methodology includes a) a platform and protocol analysis to analyze how technology allows the communities to come into being, and b) an institutional analysis in terms of community and content to analyze the social aspects of these communities. In this analysis, I will research how my two case studies (DEATH BATTLE! and its subsequent works, and the Twitch plays Pokémon stream) were appropriated in their platforms by their makers to enhance the sense of belonging in communities. For the technological part, I will use José van Dijck’s ‘platform dissasemblage’ to examine how the platforms used by the creators of DEATH BATTLE! and Twitch plays Pokémon function in regards of community building, shaping and spreading, since her work on social media platforms offers an extensive analysis and useful insight into them. Then, for the social part, I will analyze how these communities produce their content in an open, collaborative environment, in the light of Axel Bruns’s research on produsage cultures, which is very helpful because it deals with social aspects in online communal environments. Finally, I will conclude my analysis with an examination of the way that content itself changed fan communities on matters of reception and evaluation, by using John Fiske’s tripartite model of fan productivity, a model that is still discussed and used in fan studies (Hills 131), along with critiques and suggestions by Matt Hills.

I will draw the aforementioned theoretical concepts to analyze how these communities that evolve around user-generated content come into being and
functionality. These concepts (dissasemblage of platforms, produsage cultures’ characteristics, and the tripartite model) will be discussed in the following pages. I particularly choose these concepts, because they all offer a detailed look on online communities, each one highlighting a different perspective: van Dijck’s dissasemblage of platforms offers a look at how social media platforms’ tools affect participatory culture, and how they converge with each other; the produsage characteristics of Bruns explain the elements a produsage community is made of, and the tripartite model separates three types of fan productivity, while, at the same time, shedding some light on issues of hierarchy. In the following sections, I will explain what these concepts entail and how I am going to use them in my own research. I will also explain more about my methodology (in 2.2., 2.3. and 2.4.), and suggest my own categorization of fans to see whether it is sufficient in contemporary fandom-based user-generated content projects (in 2.5.).

2.2. Social media platforms characteristics and expectations
Participatory culture was the concept through which the Web promised “to nurture communities and connections” (van Dijck 4). And now, after these communities and connections are built, the audience member—as Russell W. Neuman observes- can be both passive and active at the same time (qtd. in Castells 128). A member of the audience can now, not only consume content passively, but can also create: create meanings (which has always been an audience member’s trait) (Hills 132), but, thanks to contemporary technology—and especially social media—create and distribute content in multiple ways. After all, social media are “a group of Internet-based application that build on ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (qtd. in van Dijck 4). Especially when applied to fandom, social media platforms prove even more that nowadays “consumption becomes production; reading becomes writing; spectator culture becomes participatory culture” (Jenkins, Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers 60). So, what are these platforms and how do they function?

José van Dijck proposes a dissasemblage of platforms as microsystems (28). She presents a platform in a form of circle consisting of other, smaller circles, each one of them next to each other, representing certain elements that are key to understanding
how platforms work – and that therefore need academic attention. These elements are ownership, technology, users/usage, content, business models and governance. Of significance is the fact that those that interest this research the most -users/usage, content and aspects of technology- are placed next to each other on that model. It is true than in this ‘culture of connectivity’ as termed by van Dijck –and subsequently in participatory culture-., users, content and the technology available are constantly intertwining: for instance, users can shape content by making use of the technology available. In van Dijck’s work, platform elements are organized in two parts: the techno-cultural and the socioeconomic. In this analysis, I will use and focus mainly on the techno-cultural part which includes the elements that interest me the most: users/usage and content and the parts of technology (The other three elements belong to the socioeconomic part.) What I am going to do is look at all ways each platform (technology) discussed here allows for the audience (users) to get involved with a specific community whose main topic is user-generated content (content). Every platform has some specific functions and protocols that make participation possible, so these functions and protocols will be the first focus of my analysis, as I attempt to see the role these aspects play in the community building of my case studies.

At this point, it is worth mentioning that a platform might be defined as “the provider of software, (sometimes) hardware, and services that help code social activities into a computational data” (van Dijck 28), whereas protocol is something that platforms make use of; they are the rules that platform employ, allowing for a specific use (van Dijck 31).

YouTube was promoted as an alternative, not only to television, but to all levels: technology, business and content (van Dijck 110). One of the outcomes of this touting as an ‘alternative’, brought forward the contrast of user-generated content against professionally generated content.

YouTube is now an integrated part in the media entertainment industry, while thriving on cultural mood of participation and community building. Although these statements are valid, YouTube is not the only variable in the equation. Without a doubt, YouTube is the most popular video sharing platform, but there are more ‘alternatives to the alternative’, some of them addressed to a specific audience, narrowing down an even more niche community, so although YouTube is one of van Dijck’s case studies, similar elements can be traced in other video sharing platforms,
many of them used as hosts of user-generated content (like twitch.tv). These platforms are based on three principles: sharing online creativity, community-based social activity, and egalitarian interaction (van Dijck 158). The first two can be easily observed and not disputed. However, the equality part is not standing on a solid base, because matters of hierarchy always come up (see below).

2.3. From the ‘prosumer’ towards the ‘produser’

The content development processes found in communities themselves no longer resemble those of organized industrial production (Bruns, From Prosumption to Produsage 67). To analyze how these processes affect the social extensions of fan-based user-generated content communities, I will draw on Axel Bruns’s observations on the ‘produser’. These observations are also part of my method, therefore, after explaining what produsage is about and what it entails, I will compare the four basic characteristics of produsage to the communities under study in my thesis, to see how these communities’ social values stand, and on the same time, check how a theoretical concept like this, used for knowledge sharing cultures, applies on fan cultures.

Axel Bruns mentions two crucial concepts, the ‘prosumer’ and the ‘produser’. Although the prosumer has to do more with business strategies, it is important to explain it briefly, so we can understand the passage to the produser. According to Bruns (From Prosumption to Produsage, 68-69), companies started trying to involve their customers into the making process, a practice first observed in the 1970s. Whether by polls (or competitions, like the one in which customers could decide on the name of the next potato chips flavour) or by ways of customization (like the Build-A-Bear practice in which customers can create their own teddy bear doll), companies offer their customers “the opportunity to customize and personalize the products they wish to purchase” (Bruns, From Prosumption to Produsage 68). This is the prosumer, a concept created by the combination of ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’, which brought forth a one-sided relationship, one that brings to mind some early critiques of Web 2.0 of “merely exploiting the free labor of user-led content creation to the benefit of the corporations, which operate the Websites” (Bruns, From Prosumption to Produsage 68).

There is some justification for these accusations. Websites like Google and Amazon have used (and still are using) this practice. However, this is not the case on
the majority of web platforms and communities which enable communication and open participation between users. In these platforms, although there is some control of a hierarchy over the majority via established members, administrators and/or moderators, “participants have access to holoptism, the ability for any participant to see the whole” (qtd. in Bruns, From Prosumption to Produsage 3), and to participate actively in this community, not just being exploited by a big company.

The emergence of Web 2.0 highlighted the need of a rethinking of the ‘prosumer’ concept. With all the novelties that it brought, the prosumer made way for a newer type of participant, the ‘produser’, a combination of the ‘producer’ and ‘user’, two terms that –a few years ago- one could not think as co-existing, but now, in the era of Web 2.0, “digital media have blurred relations between the once clearly demarcated realms of producers and consumers” (Uricchio 143).

The difference between the traditional production model and the newer model of produsage can be mapped out by four affordances, as stated by Bruns (From Production to Produsage, 19-20). For Bruns, collaborative systems function in a probabilistic problem solving. Problem solutions are not directed and participants have access to full overview, free of the commands of the one. For instance, in a shared knowledge community, let’s say a filmmaking forum, one can post a question about some editing software, and get responses by, potentially, any willing member. That brings us to the next affordance.

Communities like these are based on an equipotentiality, rejecting a model of hierarchy. Equal participation and say in decision-making is what defines them. Authority is not denied -only fixed hierarchy- preferring an authority based on factors like one’s involvement on the project or expertise. In the aforementioned example, if the problem is about comparison between two editing programmes, those that have used both are likely to be more relevant. On the contrary, if the question is about fixing the programme, a technician’s suggestions will be more welcome.

The next affordance has to do with participants’ contribution by executing “granular, not composite tasks”, breaking down each task’s complexity and sharing it amongst them. According to Bruns, if tasks cannot be carried out, there is need for more direction and guidance. Returning to our example, if the programme is not working, or someone wants to add specific modifications to it, a member may create a
patch for it. If the patch maker needs help on this matter, he/she may ask for help from other members and share responsibilities with them.

The last affordance is very definitive of contemporary produsage: the content has to be shared and not exclusive to some advantageous parties. Sharing is an essential element of collaboration, because it allows for equal participation and also brings closer to the solution of any problems that may arise. From all of these points, what seems relevant is Clay Shirky’s quote that “we are all producers now” (qtd. in Bruns, From Production to Produsage 17), along with J.C. Herz’s statement that “the community now works like a ‘hive mind’” (qtd. in Bruns, From Production to Produsage 15), or a “collective intelligence” (qtd. in Jenkins, Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers 139). A larger entity made out of multiple different individuals, all working towards the same goal -or at least many of them, since assuming that everyone’s working for a common goal may sound a bit too idealistic.

Bruns (From Prosumption to Produsage, 70-73) points out four characteristics of the produser culture, which I will analyze briefly here. Here I feel the need to point out that Bruns uses Wikipedia as an example, but as he stresses “the approaches described in the following discussion also apply to a vast range of other content creation projects”.

First of all, produsing is based on open participation and communal evaluation. That means that anyone is able to participate in a community, though each contribution is subject to evaluation by other members of the community. Although, his examples are related to the openness in Wikipedia and evaluation by other members of it, such tendencies are observed in other kinds of communities, even fan community ones. Especially in the fanfiction field, the characteristic of openness (anyone is welcome to participate) should be stressed, as well as the evaluation part. Of course, Wikipedia is about shared knowledge, whereas fanfiction is about entertainment, but still evaluation (even in its silent/private form) exists in almost any aspect of our everyday life.

The second characteristic has to do with unfinished artefacts and a continuing process. This point describes that produsing is an ongoing process; one that creates content (artefacts) not bound by a limit, an end. Again, this applies better to Wikipedia, in which a term is always open for editing and discussion, never ceasing to exist. However, popular culture items can also have this characteristic, although not as
often as other fields. “User-created content generated under such conditions must be thought of as consisting of unfinished artefacts, engaged in a continuing process of revision and development” (Bruns, *From Prosumption to Produsage* 71).

Although equal and free participation for all is described ideally as a basis of Web 2.0, this is not always the case, which brings us to the third characteristic of fluid heterarchy and ad hoc meritocracy. The ‘regime’ of the fan communities in the Web is not a “fixed forced hierarchy, but an authority based on expertise, initiation of the project etc.” (Bruns, *From Prosumption to Produsage* 72). Fan communities, although bonded by support and knowledge on a certain franchise, most of the times have someone (or someones) that preside over it, especially when these communities are online. Usually, the person responsible is the founder/creator of the website or community group, which normally regulates the community during its first years. Gradually, other members can climb towards authority over the community, making it a fluid heterarchy (as described earlier by Bruns). The ways one can ascend are normally by showing expertise over the matters concerning the community, creating content, helping in organization of events (in case the community wants to organize such) or by supporting the spreading of the community (e.g. a journalist who promotes the community he/she participates) (or a combination of any number of them). “What emerges from this complex interplay of contributors and contributions, this ongoing evaluation, re-evaluation, and repositioning of users on the basis of their latest contributions, is a highly changeable network of power relations which is best described as a fluid heterarchy and an ad hoc meritocracy” (Bruns *From Prosumption to Produsage* 73).

A fourth characteristic traced by Bruns has to do with communal property and rewards for the individual. Due to the fact that Bruns’s example is Wikipedia, no property can be claimed over a Wikipedia article, which is supposed to be written to be accessed by anyone, without an individual claiming property over it. Here, however, two objections can be pointed. The first has to do with the type of content a user creates. In the case of Bruns, Wikipedia contributors indeed cannot claim any ownership over the content they produce. On the other hand, users that create music, videos or any other kind of fan art may be able to do so, depending on the copyright and trade mark limitations placed by the company that produces the original material their work is based on. Custom figures makers, although they make figures of characters whose rights do not belong to them, still sell the figures to
interested buyers. Plus, popular user-generated content franchises are known to produce their own merchandise (e.g. the *DEATH BATTLE!* series I examine here has its own t-shirt).

### 2.4. Fiske’s tripartite model as an analytical tool

In the book *The Adoring Audience*, acclaimed media theorist John Fiske, with his chapter “The Cultural Economy of Fandom”, proposes a model which could be used for studying and analyzing productivity in fan cultures, namely user-generated content. Fiske’s model separates productivity in three categories: semiotic, enunciative and textual productivity (Hills 132-133). The three parts of the model mentioned here will be used as my tool to examine the productivity aspects of my case study communities. At the same time, since the model was proposed longer than two decades ago, it is also going to be tested for its validity and relevance.

Semiotic productivity takes place almost automatically, every time one is exposed to some kind of content. For instance, when an individual watches an episode of a series, all the thought he/she makes regarding the content received is the semiotic productivity. This kind of productivity is completely internal and personal, and works on a personal level.

The second kind is the enunciative productivity. This one, differentiated from the semiotic productivity, takes place mainly on a interpersonal level. A spectator that has seen an episode or a movie discusses with someone else possible meanings, theories or outcomes, leading to a kind of productivity, temporary though. In addition, any changes on an individual’s appearance that showcase his/her attachment to a cultural products (e.g. a *Doctor Who* t-shirt or a jedi padawan braid) are signifiers readable only by the ‘initiated’, therefore able to lead both to a semiotic and an enunciative productivity. For Fiske, enunciative productivity lasts as long as the people engaged in it decide. Still, crucial is the fact that this productivity is relatively narrow, existing among specific groups of people –not anyone can understand and appreciate the meaning of this productivity.

Fiske’s third category is the textual productivity and it deals with material production. A fan that makes a video with highlights of a movie is engaging with textual productivity. The same goes for someone who creates a fan-made video game, or films a reenaction of a movie scene. In general lines, textual productivity has to do
with the actual production of something novel. Now, Fiske’s third category was discussed in a pre-Web 2.0 era, therefore it was used to refer to other kinds of productions –fan fiction, fan art and more. Textual productivity, though, is a very broad term. It can be used to contain numerous examples of material (or non-material) that could be further diversified into more subcategories. For instance, in the videogaming field, there can exist a distinction between video game narratives (such as fan art or montaged videos) and mechanisms (walkthroughs, fan sites, modifications etc), all of them requiring a different kind of skill set (Hills 133).

A number of authors have identified a complication with the categories when this model is applied on online communities. Cornell Sandvoss (qtd. In Hills 135) suggests that the difference should be found in terms of mediation. Hills summarizes that these products:

> If they are uploaded and made available to a communal audience then they become clear instances of (mediated) textual productivity. On the other hand, a fanvid made especially to be screened at a specific social event would be readable as both textual productivity and as space/time-bounded enunciative productivity, whilst a video shot for a fan convention and only then subsequently uploaded to YouTube and circulated by fans as time-sensitive ‘spreadable media’ would in fact move from hybrid textual-enunciative to pure textual productivity across the different phases of its convention/web 2.0 sharing. (135; italics by the author)

It is very crucial to mention here is that the three categories are not solid, therefore any example may fit all. I already mentioned that a t-shirt or a haircut could have both enunciative and semiotic productivity ties. The same applies for other kinds of productivity. Hills gives the example of a Steven Moffat interview filmed exclusively for a Doctor Who convention and shown there. That video belonged to the enunciative productivity, but when it was uploaded on the internet and distributed freely, it became a textual/enunciative narrative. Other examples like pictures taken from a series episode’s filming and posted online could ‘play’ at two (or all three) categories at the same time (135-136).

### 2.5. Anatomy of a fan community

I am now going to propose my own categories of online community members, applied to fan cultures, in order to see how all the previous mentioned theoretical framework
stands in relation to it, along with matters of authority and hierarchy. But first, I am going to mention the two sources I based my categorization on.

Hills (134) quotes Cornel Sandvoss on how Fiske’s three parts can correspond with three categories of fan audience proposed by Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst. Specifically, Sandvoss argues that the three parts of productivity, semiotic, enunciative and textual, are related to what he calls fans, cultists and enthusiasts respectively.

In addition, Seth Godin highlights some common traits of communities (11) – he calls them ‘tribes’. For Godin, a community (tribe) requires, first of all, a shared interest. Groups are gathered around a common goal, interest or preference and formulate themselves accordingly to the needs of their objective. Furthermore, they require a way to communicate, that is a medium. In face-to-face meetings this medium could be just the air that carries the particles of sound vibrated by each person’s vocal chords. However, in today’s intermediated world there is no need for face-to-face contact for a group to formulate and communicate. In my introduction I described how mass media, like print and radio assisted in the spreading of ideas and the enhancement of the imagined communities, namely groups of people with shared interests and common goals. What is needed today is just a quick internet access. Groups – tribes- can be formulated with much more easy now, much like the face-to-face communication, quick and clear in the same way, but without actual members meeting or knowing each other personally. No matter, though, how these groups communicate, they are always separated in leaders and members.

Inspired by Abercrombie and Longhurst’s categories, and Godin’s separation of members and leaders, I have created my own online fan cultures categories. These are: the simple fan, the enthusiast, the advantageous enthusiast, the maker and the passerby. Although I could use Abercrombie and Longhurst’s already existent categorization, I believe that online fan communities include traits that differentiate them from regular communities. For instance, the advantageous enthusiast who pays extra for additional content is more likely to be found (and showcased) in an online forum than a comic convention.

The simple fan has a simple definition too. It is that member of a fan community that likes and supports the franchise that the specific community is built around, and therefore follows the community’s activities regularly. He/she views new content,
reviews older, and regularly shares it with other people of his/her environment.

The **enthusiast** is somewhat a bit more fanatic than the simple fan. An enthusiast not only mimics whatever his/her simple counterpart does, but takes it a step further with actions like subscription to a page or platform (e.g. YouTube) so as to never miss a beat, and also participates in forms of enunciative productivity like discussions, reading wikis focused on the subject or assembling collections of related merchandise.

Now, the **advantageous enthusiast** is not a category that can be found in all occasions, rather than in specific examples, however since these examples are evergrowing and increasing, I decided it is worthy to mention it. An advantageous enthusiast is called like this exactly because has an advantage over other enthusiasts. He/she is willing to pay the extra fares some websites require in order to have access to premium content. For instance, the website ScrewAttack offers free content, but also extra content to the “Advantage” subscribers who pay the $3.95 monthly (or $40 yearly) subscription fee.

The **maker** is, simply put, a creator of new content. Whether a single individual or a larger group of people, members of this category have elements of the two previously mentioned categories (enthusiast and advantageous enthusiast), but take it a step further and gets their hands full with textual productivity. Whether it is simple images, videos, video game mods, custom figures, fan literature or anything else, a maker is expected to create such things, whether possessing the necessary skill set or not. It is very possible that a maker, as a fan of a franchise, is also a **leader** in a different community. Online platforms –and their subsequent communities- allow the existence of a new kind of star system, one that holds successful users more influential than others whose work is amateurish or less frequent. If a maker creates some content and publishes it, it is possible that other people will gather around formulating a new community, proclaiming the maker as the leader. For example, *The Angry Video Game Nerd* started as a project of a video game enthusiast, James D. Rolfe expressing his opinion on video games. Now, he has his own community and following in which his both a maker and a leader. There have also been occasions in which a leader is also a **connector**. Clay Shirky (225-229) mentions Joi Ito, a writer and inventor, who, back in the early 2000’s, found an innovative way to gather all his followers, admirers and people that wanted to interact with him. He created the IRC channel #joiito, in which anyone could join and found themselves in a group with other people sharing interest for this specific person. Ito is not the only example, other
notable personalities have created fora, blogs or group discussions, giving their followers or fans the chance to gather and either interact with each other or talk directly to the connector.

Another category could be the one bearing the simplified name *passerby*. A passerby is someone that is not supportive of the specific franchise but will have a look at the content out of curiosity. Passersby get involved in internal, semiotic productivity. It is the job of the fans to ‘recruit’ as many passersby as they can to their “ranks” and convert them to fans too.

It is important to mention that much like Fiske’s tripartite model, these categories are not strict too and are characterized by fluidity. An enthusiast can edit a picture and use it as computer wallpaper, thus becoming maker for a brief period of time and then returning to enthusiast status. Moreover, I should also mention that there can be fractures inside fan communities, with fans having different attitude towards other fans, consisting of factions and sub-categories. CarrieLynn D. Reinhard (2013) mentions some examples of fans looking down at other, newer members, and holding stances like ‘I was here before it was cool’ or fans believing that if you support one fan culture you cannot support another one that is similar (e.g. *Star Wars* vs. *Star Trek*). Although this indeed can become far more complex than the categories I described above, this analysis will remain focused on fans’ relation to production and consumption of user-generated content.

Still, one last point I should point out is not necessarily a category of fans, rather a behaviour that all members of fan community have the possibility to show - a threat which Axel Bruns claims comes from the user community itself: a constant danger caused by provocative behaviour, such as trolling, flaming, inside jokes and/or aggressiveness towards new, uninitiated or differentiated members (*From Production to Produsage*, 310). Although not a particular category is expected to be like this, it is not uncommon that a member will experience such a predicament at least once.

### 2.6. Hierarchy and evaluation in the communities

Another point made by Hills while reflecting on Fiske’s tripartite model has to do with the unavoidable hierarchical evaluations that appear as a result to the wide and free circulation of user-generated content (139-150), and will be presented below. Whenever new content is posted, there are numerous methods for the audience to
express approval or disapproval: functions such as ‘likes’ or ‘dislikes’, comments and the number of shares are some of them. After all, “within the realm of popular culture, fans are the true experts; they constitute a competing educational elite” (Jenkins, Textual Poachers 86).

Very relevant to the aforementioned situation is a tension of a conflict between the ‘elitists’ and the ‘populists’ of fan creation. David Gauntlett supports that “creatAvity is something that is felt, not something that needs external expert verification” (qtd. in Hills 79). Moreover:

> Everyday creativity refers to a process which brings together at least one active human mind, and the material or digital world, in the activity of making something. The activity has not been done in this way by this person (or these people) before. The process may arouse various emotions, such as excitement and frustration, but most especially a feeling of joy. When witnessing and appreciating the output, people may sense the presence of the maker, and recognize those feelings. (qtd. in Hills 76)

Although the preceding opinions about populism in creativity sound very romantic, skill set can sometimes really make the difference. One can say that it is easy to sketch, but not anyone can draw the Mona Lisa. That brings us to other category, the elitists.

The elitists acknowledge everyone’s inner need of expression and creation, but disregard texts that are not constructed skilfully. For them, a lolcat is not quite worth the attention. Andrew Keen even goes as far as to call this kind of users as “exuberant monkeys creating mediocrities” (qtd. in Hills 145). A new, original, whole work, like a movie, is a ‘first-order expression’. Fragmentary experimentations, like a ‘best-off’ video are ‘second-order expressions’, by no means on the same league with the former.

Another distinction, according to Barbara Klinger, is made between ‘ephemeral’ and ‘durable’ fan texts (qtd. in Hills 142). The idea here is that a well-crafted production that will appeal to the majority of its audience will not be forgotten easily, whereas a simple one will not stay around for long. It could be described simply in the following phrase ‘become known, become immortal’. As an example, Star Wars Uncut, is mentioned. Star Wars Uncut, a project made by fans, had enthusiasts of the popular franchise re-shoot and re-create the famous first movie in its entirety. Of course, in order for each scene to be included, it had first to undergo through a process
of online distribution and evaluation by other fans alike (‘likes’/‘dislikes’). However, “social networking-based recommendation and evaluation are likely to reinforce, not challenge” (Couldry 107). There are numerous examples of websites in which media workers act in a helping mood, and all they do is offering advice to newer entrants. But it is not only media workers that are glad to help, but –very important – fans as well. Fans, especially those that have been known as ‘leaders’ of a community sometimes deem it important to offer advice on other upcoming fan producers on how to incorporate themselves and join the ‘guild’.

One website that has been online since 1997 is The Kombat Pavilion. That website features lots of material about the popular Mortal Kombat video game franchise, like screen savers, screenshots from the games, and sounds. Along with them, there is also a category named ‘Comics’ in which can be found a large variety of comics made by the use of sprites and images borrowed by Mortal Kombat games (and others) and edited in a way to narrate a story. The main idea is that anyone can submit their comic and see it posted online. Since more than 200 visitors have submitted their own work (many of them more than once, creating their own series), it can be understood that it is a concept that has drawn the interest of the series’ fans. In addition, the webmaster of the Kombat Pavilion, going by the nickname 1f0MBAT, has created a sector named ‘Comics Tutorial’ which provides helpful step-by-step guidelines on how anyone can create their own sprite comic.
One thing that I found noteworthy is the text the ninjas use in Fig.1.1. They say that “[we] are banding together to help you”. And they are not the only ones. There are many communities out there that do not only accept the work of all participants, but also have members willing to help and guide other members. Clay Shirky argues that communities that want to overcome any challenges should first and foremost make the joining easy and available to all (151-152).

Just like the example about the filmmaking forum I gave earlier, there are lots of communities online that would gladly welcome new members and advice them for free. All the affordances described earlier by Axel Bruns can be found in numerous user-generated content communities, especially in those that have to do with audiovisual entertainment artefacts. M.U.G.E.N. is a free-to-download game engine, which is open for modifications and additions. Users have created multiple online M.U.G.E.N. communities, in which they gather, exchange views and advice each other on game additions and edits. If someone wants to know how to add a specific character on the game, they can ask on any M.U.G.E.N. forum or watch one of the
many tutorial videos that are distributed freely – by the way, these characters are also available for free download, just like all M.U.G.E.N. components.

Here, I am reminded of the opinion stating that “fan cultures are simultaneously becoming more accessible and more exclusive, and … these two dynamics are integrally dependent on one another” (qtd. in Hills 281). Therefore, what has been happening here is that actually these two tendencies co-exist and do not necessarily cancel each other. After all, ‘[it is] the point in which any community becomes a real community … when a selection of that community gets accused of being elitist’ (qtd. in Hills 290).

2.7. Where do we go from here?
Many creators hope that through user-generated content, their work will be recognized, winning them some employment in the future. Therefore, this could be described as a kind of investment for the future. Bruns states that “several leading contributors to the development of open source software packages have used such acclaim to boost their professional careers as developers, consultants, or authors, for example” (From Prosumption to Produsage, 7). These professionals are claimed to belong in the new category called ‘Pro-Ams’, amateurs following professional standards, while displaying knowledge, education, commitment, and are also networked (Bruns, From Production to Produsage 5). These Pro-Ams are constantly on the look to make the transition to full professional, like one Dane Boedigheimer did.

In 2009 a peculiar video appeared on YouTube. The video, named The Annoying Orange, featured a human-faced orange talking to another human-faced fruit - an apple- and annoying it with puns and silly sounds. At the end of the video, the orange would ask the apple “Hey, Apple”, only for the apple to respond “What?” and get the reply “Knife!”. At that instant, a knife would fall and cut the apple in half, leaving the orange without someone to annoy - until the very next second, when the orange would shout “Hey, Pear” to a pear and the video would end. This video went viral in a short time (more than a million views in three weeks, and more than one hundred sixty million views until May 2015), prompting its creator, Dane Boedigheimer, to make it a regular series, which later became a franchise with toys, video games and television episodes.
Although many users upload their videos for non-commercial reasons, it is highly possible that Boedigheimer created his orange for more than a mere display of his abilities (Morreale 116); at that time he was working as a freelance filmmaker, making short promotional videos. It is expected that every filmmaker, especially when trying to make the transition from amateur or part-time professional to full-time professional, is looking for a way to promote him/herself and find some potential customers or projects to work in.

Boedigheimer, with his work on *The Annoying Orange*, became a member of the *The Collective Digital Studio*, a management company whose purpose is to locate and develop creative talent across a multitude of media platforms, functioning somehow like Hollywood’s old Studio System, by producing, developing and distributing new video content on a continuous rate (Morreale 117). Therefore, YouTube may still be a platform for anyone to express his/herself (its motto is ‘Broadcast Yourself’), but agencies like *The Collective Digital Studio* are those that actually maintain YouTube by discovering amateurs and initiating them in the arts of professional filmmaking (or web-filmmaking). That way, more users are encouraged to ‘broadcast themselves’ and aspire to make it big time.
Part 3: Analysis of case studies

After having discussed all the theory, it is time to delve into my case studies and see whether and how the aforementioned theoretical framework applies or if there is the need for the devising of new concepts. By examining the case studies, I will look at how communities of original content and streaming make use of their platforms to enhance their members, how they evolve and progress, and what kind of content they make. Both case studies will be examined separately, with a comparison following at the end. At first, I will analyze their respective platforms and protocols, I will follow with their produsage characteristics and social aspects of them, and then end with matters of productivity and how (and if) this productivity goes beyond each community (and what does that mean).

For this analysis, I am not picking a specific viewpoint. What I am going to do is use two of the most popular examples of user-generated content to highlight issues of contemporary fan culture in regards of online communities shaping, developing, functioning and spreading. DEATH BATTLE! is one of the most well-known example of video fanfiction online, with almost every video amassing millions of views (most of the videos have about three to five million views at the moment, with some of them that involve popular characters exceeding ten million views (Mario VS Sonic (2011) has eighteen million and Goku VS Superman (2013) has almost thirty). Twitch Plays Pokémon is picked because it managed, in a very brief time, to draw attention not only to the streaming, but to twitch.tv itself, gathering a crowd of about 70,000 spectators at its peak (Makuch and Haywald 2014). First, I will give a brief historical outline of each case study, and then I will examine how communities are built in terms of technology (platforms and protocol analysis), users and content (institutional analysis).

3.1. Original Content and Community Shaping

3.1.1 It’s time for a DEATH BATTLE!

In December 2010, a new web show made its debut on YouTube. Its title DEATH BATTLE! was indicative of what was about to follow. The main idea was that of a show pitting characters of popular culture franchises against each other in battles to the death. The show was made in the machinima-fashion (graphics ‘borrowed’ from
video games or other animations and edited to narrate a different story) by aspiring filmmaker Ben ‘Wiz’ Singer. Singer, had just finished his Metal Gear Ben series, and inspired by the web series RWBY decided to start working on this project.

The show began by introducing each of the competing characters, providing details about their background story, personality traits, weapons, armours, skills, strengths and weaknesses. During the presentation, a video would play showcasing the characters’ mentioned characteristics (e.g. in the Deadpool VS Deathstroke video (2014), when the narrators talked about Deadpool’s accomplishment of outwitting Taskmaster in one-on-one combat, the clip played showed a bit from a cartoon series in which the aforementioned battle took place). Then, animated versions of the featured characters would face each other to the death, with an analysis following after, explaining why that particular character won; for instance, on the Master Chief VS Doomguy battle (2011), the analysis explains: “Doomguy may have an enormously destructive arsenal, but, unfortunately, his weapons lack versatility.” The first-ever video was Samus Aran, the protagonist from the video game franchise Metroid, going against Bobba Fett, the bounty hunter from the Star Wars movies (and the accompanying line of media).

After the episodes progressed, DEATH BATTLE! took further steps. The spin-off series, One Minute Melee was introduced. It was labelled as a bi-weekly series of fictional battles between characters in which no research and no additional elements are used. The characters just engage in one-on-one fights that have a one-minute duration. What is significant is the fact that apart from the first three battles, all others begin by showing a screen full of viewers’ YouTube comments asking for the battle shown on the episode. It works in a “you ask, we deliver” fashion. Therefore, although fan participation by the way of requests is taking place in every DEATH BATTLE! video, in the case of One Minute Melee, it becomes even more evident, working in a “you want it-we got it” fashion. Then, there is the Desk of DEATH BATTLE!, a show hosted by ‘Jocelyn the Intern’ whose job is to present weird and unusual data about characters that were found during their research for a previous DEATH BATTLE! episode, although they were not used.
Fig 1.2. One Minute Melee creators claim that they deliver whatever their audience wants.

On the 26th of February 2015, *DEATH BATTLE!* went for the very first time live. That was confusing since there was no clear description of how that would happen. However, for the viewers that tuned in that day, there was a surprise. Apart from the regular episode, there was a pre-show and a post-show, with ScrewAttack co-founder Craig, *DEATH BATTLE!* hosts Ben Singer and Chad James, and animator Torrian Crawford discussing *DEATH BATTLE!* . What was most significant was the fact that viewers could participate by tweeting their question to the show and getting real-time answers. However, the time constraints of such an action did not allow all of the tweets to be read.

Other series of that fashion have started circulating on the Web too. *Bat in the Sun* is a YouTube channel in which professional cosplayers (people dressed up as popular culture characters) and actors impersonate fictional heroes, starring in episodes that combine characters and events from numerous franchises, expanding in a way the stories of these ‘universes’. That channel is popular because of its series *Super Power Beat Down*, in which characters engage in battle, much like *DEATH BATTLE!* , only this time the video is live action with real people portraying the characters. Frequently, fans get to vote and decide future outcomes of these narratives. Original content rarely features any interactive elements, therefore issues like community building have to be taken care otherwise. Although, it is important to mention that *DEATH BATTLE!* videos are uploaded on YouTube, this is not the
show’s main ‘location’. Most of the times, fan-made projects like this, are based on a website, which fans, even passersby sometimes, will visit in order to see where that show they like has originated from.

For *DEATH BATTLE!*, these origins began at screwattack.com. *ScrewAttack* started as a project created by two video game enthusiasts, Craig Skistimas and Thomas Hanley. Started in February 2006, a few months after the seventh generation of console gaming started, the project -named after an attacking movement found in the popular *Metroid* video game series- was initially a website featuring the podcast *SideScrollers*, a show about video games and popular culture in general. A little later, *ScrewAttack* started collaborating with *GameTrailers*, another website, offering to GameTrailers some of its content. Then, other syndication partners followed and *ScrewAttack*’s videos started acquiring millions of views on platforms like YouTube and *IGN* (also known as *Imagine Games Network*).

In 2011, *ScrewAttack* launched a new website, featuring and encouraging bigger involvement and fan participation. Now fans not only can create their own profile on the website, but they can also interact with each other, strengthening the communal bonds. Plus, members are also able to post their own thoughts on their ‘wall’ (much like a Facebook post) or create a blog entry, upload pictures and, generally, customize their online version of themselves. In addition to that, it is also possible to ‘subscribe’ to other users, so to see what their updates are. Therefore, apart from (obviously) being subscribed to the website and getting updates and news by the makers themselves, the member can also subscribe to other members, making a division in fandom here. Moreover, *ScrewAttack* staff frequently picks content that has been submitted by users and uploads it on their official website, showcasing their work and ‘rewarding’ that way their members.Members that subscribe to other members are fans of fans, and those fans that ‘recognition’ are makers and leaders. Protocols like these allow for a diversity and differentiation in the community, proving exactly that fan categories are not fixed but fluid.

Any person that is a ‘g1’ knows that they belong in a ‘world’ along with others that follow popular culture franchises and products, but in case they forget, there is always the rule set everyone has to follow and respect, starting with rule number one “Everyone is welcome here” (Fig. 2.1.).

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2 This is how the *ScrewAttack* community refers to its members.
After having described *DEATH BATTLE!* and ScrewAttack’s brief history, I will now analyze how original content and its providers (in this case screwattack.com) encourage community bonds through their technical infrastructure.

*DEATH BATTLE! leads to ScrewAttack, ScrewAttack leads to a community: An analysis of the technical infrastructure*

A few ways of strengthening the community can be observed in *DEATH BATTLE!*.
The series (and its spin-offs) ends always with the hosts encouraging the audience to like, favourite and subscribe the videos and their channel, thus trying to transform their ‘simple fandom’, fans that just watch the content, to a more ‘enthusiastic fandom’, namely much more active, participating in discussions and online groups and subscribing to content. Furthermore, *DEATH BATTLE!* (and subsequently ScrewAttack) encourages what seems to become a new trend in the online fan community area, the advantageous enthusiasm. Promotion of advantageous enthusiasm (which I explained in my second chapter) is found in the very first visit that someone makes to the website. In the upper-right corner there is a button with the inscription ‘ADVANTAGE’, taking even larger space than the regular ‘sign in’ button (Fig 2.1.). After one clicks it, the screen displayed shows pictures of numerous members of the ScrewAttack crew, either alone or with fans and the inscription “WELCOME TO THE SCREWATTACK FAMILY”. Judging by this, anyone can become a member, a follower, but in order to become ‘family member’, the website protocol encourages the individual to convert to an advantageous membership. Moreover, a little downwards on the same screen the question “How can I support ScrewAttack?” appears only to be answered by:

To answer that question, we created the Advantage program. This is our thanks to the most supportive g1’s in our beloved community - a way of giving you more ScrewAttack. We can't thank you enough because your support is what allows us to do what we love every day - making content for our extended internet family. You'll never lose essential ScrewAttack content by not being an Advantage subscriber - but you might be missing out on a second helping of dessert. (ScrewAttack)
ScrewAttack appears now as a ‘family’, a family that rewards its members. It would not be unusual for any ‘healthy’ and growing online community to include such tactics; tactics that look towards the advantageous enthusiasm, making sure of these enthusiasts’ devotion, and possible economic benefits. And if you are a part of the family, you are also expected to know and understand all kinds of humour and inside jokes used there.

On April 25th 2015, an article was published on screwattack.com. The article was not long, just the newest addition to the weekly column The Saturday Strips. Yet, there was something eye-catching added to it. A cartoon image depicting a small man saying “NOW WITH BETTER ONE-LINERS THAN BOOMSTICK’S QUIPS!”.

What is significant in this quote is that it refers to ‘Boomstick’, the character that DEATH BATTLE! co-host Chad James portrays on the show. The image, in order to be understood, requires that the reader of the article has previous knowledge of who Boomstick is and how his humour is expressed. Therefore, the said picture may not be a part of the DEATH BATTLE! series, but is somehow related to it, since it enforces the bond of the ScrewAttack family mentioned above: the reader is a member of the family-community, therefore for sure knows DEATH BATTLE!, Boomstick and his jokes.

Although this technical infrastructure is not directly related to the original content category I proposed earlier, it contains tools of strengthening the community bonds and feeling of belonging of the website. DEATH BATTLE! is their primary, most well-known and most viewed series. Anyone who wishes to learn more about it and
see the ‘home’ that DEATH BATTLE! was ‘raised’, has to visit ScrewAttack, therefore becoming an enthusiast – a fan that follows lots of related content and does not miss a beat- and stand on the suitable grounds to convert into an advantageous enthusiast – thus, being willing to pay for extra content.

In addition, ScrewAttack is one of the examples of a community going live and real. Since 2013, the staff of the website are organizing a yearly convention, following the standards of the popular fan conventions like the San Diego Comic-Con. In that convention that lasts for three days, members are welcome to attend a gathering featuring Q&A panels, meetings with ScrewAttack staff and makers, video game competitions, cosplay and other expressions of fandom.

If ScrewAttack authorities were not sure about their big cult following, they would have not organized this convention in the first place. Plus, such an event is an effective way of communal bond and sense of belonging. DEATH BATTLE! (and ScrewAttack) imagined community still remains imagined, since not every member is able to attend, but it could be claimed that this is a next step of the imagined community, since new media are being used in order to bring a large proportion of its members together to make their presence known. So, in instances like this, not only the technical infrastructure helps in the strengthening of the communal bonds, but live events and gatherings allow for such communities to go beyond the Internet and become even more connected and united.

DEATH BATTLE!, but alive community:
An institutional analysis of users and content.

Anyone can participate in a community of original content making. Videos (or at least, the majority of them) are free to watch. Besides, fan communities are based on this kind of open participation and inclusivity. Regarding communal evaluation – namely content appraisal and rating by members of the community-, although it might be different in communities of shared knowledge like Wikipedia is, in this kind of participatory cultures, like those under examination here, the people that are evaluated are mainly the leaders and the makers, because they are the ones that create an artefact for the rest of the community to consume. Evaluation comes most often in the ways each platform provides, but is not only limited to these; in DEATH BATTLE!’s case it can be done the easy way with ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’ and comments or the most
complex way, by moving outside of the provider (YouTube or the *ScrewAttack* website) and use other ways of communication, like tweets or direct e-mail messages to the makers. What stands out is that this kind of content gets its evaluation on a bottom-up way (fans evaluating the work of makers/leaders) This is very substantial, since this content is made for entertainment purposes and not for the common good (like Wikipedia which promotes information and knowledge), therefore those that consume the content have the ability to directly reply to the makers and voice their opinion, thus having a say (although a minimal one) in the community’s content production process.

A series like *DEATH BATTLE!* is also an unfinished artifact. Although each episode can stand on its own, every time an episode ends there is always the “Next time on *DEATH BATTLE!*…” part that presents the next competitors, linking it that way to a bigger product. Plus, the spin-off series are somehow completing each other, therefore giving the impression that there is no strict limit to these productions. Another aspect is that fans, with their suggestions, can contribute to the creation of the new episodes, binding that way the ‘unfinished artefact’ characteristic with that of the ‘open participation’. Though, Bruns, when describing the second characteristic of produsage mentions both ‘unfinished artefact and a continuing process’, *DEATH BATTLE!* should better be described by the second; the ‘unfinished artefact’ might fit better on the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* case (see below) Anyway, this continuing process gives the community a sense of unfinishedness, making participants feel that their community’s end is far from over. The community has a specific area of interest, and as long as new content based on this interest keeps on coming, their membership will remain valid.

Fan communities are also characterized by the people they have in charge of them. Bruns on his concept of ‘fluid heterarchy and ad hoc meritocracy’ mentions that there are no actual hierarchy on communities, like Wikipedia, but some members can establish themselves. On the other hand, on fan video series communities, there is a leader always in the face of the maker; in *DEATH BATTLE!* there are the producers and hosts, but other members might manage to distinguish themselves, although their contributions are not that visible, mainly because videos are not that much of a ‘continuing process’ like other productions.

About the characteristic of the ‘communal property’, *DEATH BATTLE!* like other original content, is open for anyone to access and share, but since it is based on
preexisting work, makers of a fan community cannot support claim over the characters or events depicted in it.

However, what a specific example like *DEATH BATTLE!* lacks in aspects of open participation, process continuation, heterarchy and communal property, is filled by the websites this type of content is based upon. In the case of *DEATH BATTLE!*, the website is screwwatch.com. The community that thrives on *ScrewAttack* is always open and offers evaluation to other members’ contribution, is always expanding and welcomes contributions of other members on numerous topics, gives the opportunity for members to distinguish themselves (staff might pick videos uploaded by members and showcase them to other members), and rewards individuals. In addition, the community cannot claim any property on comments and opinions exchanged online, but still a video always belongs to its maker, making it difficult for Bruns’s concept of the ‘communal property’ to be applied here.

*DEATH BATTLE! and productivity*

It would be expected that a fluid model of fan productivity (Fiske’s tripartite model) acts exactly in a non-fixed way when applied to an equally fluid categorization of fans. Semiotic productivity, that means the interior understanding of a media text, is taking place constantly and repeatedly after one’s –anyone’s- exposure to original content such as *DEATH BATTLE!*, bringing in mind thoughts and remarks depending on a number of factors like the individual’s level of fandom. A passerby that has never seen a single *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter* movie, probably will not share the same thoughts with a (simple) fan or an enthusiast while watching the episode featuring Luke Skywalker and Harry Potter. On the other hand, fans of any (or both) film franchises are expected to have different thoughts.

Enunciative productivity too is following different outcomes on each fan category. This part of the productivity model that has to do with shared meanings and fan talk is, naturally, expected by fans of all kinds (simple fans, enthusiasts and makers), but can also take place among passersby or among passersby and fans. The passerby may address to a fan in order to learn more about a specific thing that he/she has just watched. But for a fan the enunciative productivity among his/her peers is much more interesting. After a new *DEATH BATTLE!* episode is posted, there is always a ‘war’ on the comments section between fans of each character that participated. Never can
the result of an episode be satisfying for all parties, therefore fans argue or support each other presenting facts to their discussion, justifying why their favourite character should have won. Comments like “You prove time and time again that you are biased towards Nintendo characters. It’s never too late to take off the nostalgia goggles” (2014) (in the Kirby VS Majin Buu episode) are good examples of how fans think and act towards such content, but also prove that this content allows for all sorts of enunciative productivity (opinions and commentary in this case) to be produced and expressed, even lead to confrontation and fragmentation among fans.

The third part of the model, textual productivity, has to do with the production of actual artefacts. In a sense, DEATH BATTLE! (including all of fan-based original content) are examples of textual productivity. However, what is interesting is the fact that fannish textual productivity results to more textual productivity. DEATH BATTLE! has inspired numerous fans to try their skills and create related artefacts themselves: simple ones like unofficial preview posters of upcoming episodes or even videos of their own, textual productivity has gone from being simple user-generated content to user-generated content of another user-generated content. It is significant to note here that many of these attempts have been done in order to impress the original maker (leader), so that the fan-turned-maker gets his/her voice heard and becomes recognized in the fan circle. Some of the fans may even seek employment from related websites; on ScrewAttack’s FAQ section the question “How can I work at ScrewAttack?” gets the answer “You don't find us... we find you... mwhahahahahahahahahahahah”. That means that any fans who would like to become distinguished makers themselves should perform textual productivity (based on previous textual productivity). However, there are also others, like those who create fan posters, trailers or commentary videos, and they contribute, in a way, to large body of the communal production.

3.1.2. TwitchPlaysPokemon

The second example I will analyze here belongs to the streaming category. Streaming is not a new practice, although lately more and more websites with live streaming option start to emerge. I will, therefore, examine how the technological infrastructure of twitch.tv allows for the assembly of communities in the first place, and how a specific case, TwitchPlaysPokemon, made use of the platform’s protocols. Then, I
will examine the produsage aspects of this community, along with the content created and the ways it did so.

Twitch.tv is a streaming website, used very often for the streaming of video games. Functioning as a platform that anyone can join, Twitch allows the user to stream to a live audience whatever he/she wants. It functions like the popular YouTube platform, only though Twitch’s focus relies more on live content. Another difference is due to the fact that its content is mainly live, the broadcaster can choose to show himself/herself on camera, and read comments made by viewers in real time and respond to them.

Twitch offers the possibility for someone to become an advantageous enthusiast. This can be done by paying a small subscription fee and becoming a subscriber to a particular channel. Benefits from doing so –highlighted in the subscription page as the main benefits offered- include an exclusive subscriber badge, special subscriber emoticons and access to a subscriber-only mode. Plus, -what is listed on the website as the most prominent benefit- as a subscriber you get to “directly support the broadcaster”. By supporting financially a broadcaster, you show your commitment to the cause of the community and strengthen your sense of belonging.

In addition, members have the choice to upgrade their membership into ‘turbo subscribers’. Turbo subscribers not only have additional badge and emoticon benefits –showcasing their advantageous enthusiasm even more-, they also get rid of adds and commercials to a big extent, but –very importantly, they have access to increased video storage, a feature that allows them to store their Twitch broadcasts for 60 days, thus encouraging them more to elevate from enthusiasts to makers and have advantage over other makers.

Comments on Twitch play an important role, exactly because they make the interaction stronger between what appears to be a maker (the streamer) and the rest of the community. That is why the comments section is placed right next to the screen of the streaming content, so both the streamer and the viewers have direct access to it, and do not have to scroll their way down to read the comments. So, one of the most important functions of the comments is about communication.

However, in 2014 another element was introduced, that of the storyteller, meaning that the audience could define the progress of a particular narrative (stream) and create their own content. Inspired by a previous stream on which viewers could bet on
the winner of fighting game matches, an anonymous streamer started a channel on which the game *Pokémon Red* would be streamed. The main difference was that the game was not played by the streamer but by the viewers themselves. The whole concept was that the viewers, with the use of the comments section, would type the name of a button from the Game Boy console (Up, Down, Left, Right, Select, Start, A or B). The system would accept each input and translate it as a command on the game. So, each time ‘Up’ was selected, the character would move upwards, or if ‘Start’ was selected, the pause menu would pop-up and so forth. What may sound as simple, was totally the opposite. The game is not simple on its own, let alone having nearly 6,000 other people trying to play simultaneously (and 70,000 spectators) (Makuch and Haywald 2014). It’s like someone is playing a video game, with friends or siblings trying to grab the game controller and play their own way. Only difference that there are thousands of these siblings.

Of course, having people inputting all sorts of commands can make even the easiest video game quite a task. Simple actions like selecting an item or crossing a road took minutes – even hours - to complete, and what was shown on the screen was a character walking aimlessly here and there. One memorable instance occurred when the player reached an area called ‘Route 9’. On that route exist many ledges, and one wrong move can send the character over the ledges and back again. That particular area took the community almost an entire day to complete.

The plot of the game has the unnamed protagonist (named by the player) working his way towards becoming a Pokémon master. To do so, the protagonist has to capture and train different species of creatures called Pokémon (‘Pocket Monsters’), and do battle with other trainers. Although the game –sort of– finishes when the player defeats the best trainers of the game, the ‘Elite Four’ and the Champion, the main goal is that the player captures all 150 different Pokémon species (and there is also one hidden).

*Twitch Plays Pokémon* has from the start been described by users online as a ‘social experiment’, as a way that its creator tests user interaction. However, it is not easy to confirm this. Unfortunately, *Twitch Plays Pokémon’s* creator has decided to remain anonymous, and apart from a short Q&A he/she did on reddit, there is not

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3 Although the streamer named the channel ‘TwitchPlaysPokemon’ (and thus his/her username), his/her real name has not been revealed.
4 By ‘TwitchPlaysPokemon’ I will refer to the channel and the user who made it. The name *Twitch Plays Pokémon* was given to the stream, therefore it will be used to refer to it alone.
much known about him/her and the true intentions behind it. So, when asked on reddit on the reason he/she made the stream, the answer was that he/she just wanted to make an “autonomous game stream” (Twitch-Plays-Pokemon 2015). However, this does not mean that Twitch Plays Pokémon is not a fan culture product that built a community. It uses streaming techniques and tools, along with gameplay, to allow multiple users to connect and participate in a common experience. And although it is not confirmed whether the creator wanted indeed to conduct a social experiment, he/she claims that people have seen it like this, referencing it in projects and essays in the past months. Whatever the truth is, the social element, intentional or not, of this stream is undeniable and this will become evident during the analysis.

![Twitch Plays Pokemon](image)

**Fig. 2.2.** A screenshot from the streaming. Notice the commands by the audience on the right corner. Audience could also send any other kind of comments, but they would not be translated as commands.
When the stream had first started, a friend that was following it fiercely told me “Today we managed to accomplish this”, followed by the accomplishment they made. The fact that one individual considered himself a part of a thousand people group of video gamers working towards the completion of a task is quite significant.

The truth is that a little after the streaming begun, the members started referring to themselves as the ‘hive mind’, a single entity comprised of tens of thousands ‘voices’ all speaking simultaneously to the main character’s mind, much like J.C. Herz’s concept mentioned in the second chapter. However, Herz spoke about a hive mind that had to do with network information and shared knowledge, while this new hive mind, although it too worked towards a goal that was common among its members, the main objective was pure entertainment. This ‘polyphony’ of users is why on many pieces of fan art, the main character is seen to be guided (and confused) by thousands of voices, reminding a schizophrenic. Moreover, one YouTube uploader, TheSmithPlays, which has uploaded some videos providing backstory and highlights on these streams is often referring to the community using the first person ‘we’. Especially, in one instance he mentions that “we had the unity of one” (2014).

So, it is really easy for anyone to join that ‘we’ and participate in that unity. As mentioned earlier, registration to Twitch is free and open. However, this is the simplest thing a fan can do. Twitch is structured in a way offering more possibilities to a fan that seeks to become an (advantageous) enthusiast. Fans can contribute themselves to the community, either by paying the subscription fee and gaining all the benefits Twitch has to offer, or by offering help to leader. Since its inception, many fans became makers –but not leaders- by undertaking numerous duties. For instance, one user named Besafree created a number of emoticons which then made them available for others to use in the chat. Others have contributed with content like logos and music. The streamer mentions each and everyone of them on a special thanks section of his/her channel.

From these observations it becomes apparent that it is an easy and simple task to join a community like the one of Twitch Plays Pokémón; the structure of the host website allows for it. However, in streaming communities, as in regular communities, some users with their contributions can elevate themselves and position themselves next to the maker, thus creating a separation amongst equals.
TwitchIsSocial

But the community’s real test was realized when the streamer decided to implement a new system in the game’s functionality: ‘democracy vs. anarchy’. Instead of just inputting a command on the comments section, a member could now write either ‘democracy’ or ‘anarchy’. Democracy meant that the command getting the most votes would be executed, whereas anarchy was the old system, meaning that any command given would be executed without hesitation. Every few intervals of time, the ‘regime’ with the most votes was imposed on the game, and the game progressed that way, until a new majority voted for the opposite.

To express their dismay with this new system, some members protested by intentionally inputting the START command. The START button works actually as a “pause button”, therefore by doing so excessively, the game would pause very often, causing frustration to the players. The community started showing traces of fragmentation, much like Reinhard (2013) has observed to her analysis of fragmented communities. So, apart from traces of elitism that make a real community, another trait that could be observed are traces of fragmentation. Of course, it is impossible for unanimity to exist in a community of more than 70,000 people.

In this case, Axel Bruns’s observations bring some interesting results. Open participation is really prominent here. Indeed anyone can participate in Twitch Plays Pokémon, whether as a player or an observer. And the evaluation is constant and ever-presenting: from the expression of some members dismay with the constant input of random, inconsequential commands to the fight over the ‘regime’ (democracy vs. anarchy), anyone that participates in the community can get an understanding of what the fellow members believe and want. The evaluation, though, can go to another level: when members create fan art they too get evaluated by other people.

In the streaming category, the characteristic of the unfinished artefact and continuing process is more applicable, since that particular stream never ends. It is an open community that indeed has a goal (completion of the game), but does not limit itself there: every time a game is completed, another starts. And not only they start another game, but elements of the mythos of the previous games are transported to the next ones, leading the hive mind towards a new venture.
Hierarchy (and heterarchy) matters are also differentiated here; I could say that in this case (and in other cases of streaming), both hierarchy and heterarchy co-exist. In the first place, there is the leader (the anonymous streamer) who has founded the community, but prefers to remain unseen, intervening only on important occasions -like when he/she had to implement the ‘democracy vs. anarchy’ system- leaving the streaming to the followers. But apart from that, all other matters were left entirely to the hands of the players. Anyone was allowed to express their opinion on what the game protagonist should do next, with their ‘votes’ standing as equal.

Regarding matters of communal property, the ‘knowledge’ produced (or prodused) in this case is not anyone’s property. The community appropriates it and shapes the narrative, allowing for other members to make use of the characters, concepts and events that have appeared on the game so far. However, the original games used on the stream belong to Nintendo, therefore loyalties should be given there.

It is remarkable the fact that the project was characterized as containing “the best and worst qualities of our user-driven, novelty-hungry age” (Cunningham 2014). Another remarkable side of this stream is the impact it had on the viewer (or ‘viewser’ since the viewer is at the same time the user) community. The events of the live streaming created a cult following which adapted them into a storyline (they started making comics and short novels recapitulating the story). This channel then did (and still does) the same thing with other Pokémon games, with the storyline being carried into them and progressing a universe -a mythos- making use of pre-existing templates (characters, locations, events) but to narrate a new story. To continue with the narrative, the streamer, who also happens to be an efficient game modder, streamed a version of the follow-up game, *Pokémon Crystal*, that has *Red*, - a character supposed to be the first game’s protagonist - use the same exact Pokémon team the main character of the first stream had, furthering the mythos that way.

This is some newer kind of crowdsourcing. The audience gives the maker ideas to work on future projects, so here we have user-generated content (the game) appropriated and shaped by users (the community), giving material to other users for new user-generated content (memes, websites, fan art etc.), but also to the maker (continuation of the narrative to other games the streamer modified). All the instances and events produced by the progression of the game have been recorded in numerous sources. The website tvtropes.org has a detailed telling of the
story of the first games, making use of many ‘tropes’ found in popular culture, a fact that on its own could be considered as ‘the use of user-generated content (tropes defined by fans) to describe and explain other user-generated content (the stream)’.

TwitchBecomesProductive

The community did not just limit itself on providing the next commands to the on-screen avatar. Instead, the community turned out to be very active and very imaginative. For instance, when a new Pokémon is acquired by the player, there is always the option to give it a name. The community named a Charmander, the character’s first Pokémon, ‘ABBBBBBK’ and a Rattata ‘JLVWNNOOOO’. These names, obviously, could not be easily pronounced by real people, therefore ABBBBBKK started being called ‘Abby’ by the community, and JLVWNNOOOO was now ‘Jay Leno’.

The category of makers had a brand new case to work their hands on. Countless fan-made artefacts were made out of a fan project. Along with them was created what considered to be the game’s ‘bible’. This bible, a completely fan product, was written in a way that resembled a religious text, however it was presenting incidents of the game as its key elements. The main god is the ‘Helix Fossil’, an item that appears in the game and its following worships the democracy side of the stream. Also, a website was made available online (and still is), askhelixfossil.com, in which the visitor can input any question and the narrative’s god, the ‘Helix Fossil’ will give them a random answer. These fan-made objects are all ways that continue, expand and enhance the narrative, thus providing more material for fans to deal with. This particular mythos made a forceful entry in the online popular culture. Fans would use memes, create fan art or even write their own fanfiction, using all three parts of Fiske’s tripartite model in full effect and at the same time.

Semiotic productivity is taking place mainly by simple fans and passersby that might visit the web site for a few minutes and check what is going on. Then, enunciative productivity is what is expected by all kinds of fans and enthusiasts, mostly on the comments section but on other discussion groups and online platforms. In this occasion, however, textual productivity does not occur only when fans make their own artifacts, like fan art, but also when they input a command for the game to follow. Thus, when a fan or enthusiast assists in the narration of the story, they are
fans and makers at the same time. Such an example proves that fan categorization, as well as the tripartite model, are both fluid but applicable.

![Example of the askhelixfossil.com website](image)

**Fig. 2.3.** Example of the askhelixfossil.com website

In the case of Twitch, it is expected that semiotic productivity has run rampant. On its peak, TwitchPlaysPokemon was calculated to had had more than 70,000 viewers present at the same time (Makuch and Haywald 2014), making about 70,000 different (or a little similar) semiotic products. Thoughts about the game and its narrative were limitless, thus bringing us to the second part.

Enunciative productivity of the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* video stream was (and still is) continuous: mainly taking place on the comments section, but also on online discussion boards and even in real life. But one point I would like to focus is while fans discuss and express their opinion on how the game should progress, they could at the same time participate in textual productivity.

By writing a command on the comments, their comment was translated as an in-game command, thus bringing a very interesting twist in the textual productivity part. In this case, the fans were at real time shaping the content of a user-generated content, therefore bringing textual productivity on a textual product. Streamings are a rare example of a non-scripted user-generated content, open to any possibility, whether it is *Twitch Plays Pokémon* or a streamer playing a game or commenting about something, while reading audience comments and responding at the same time. Streaming’s textual productivity is also a notable example of all fan categories being
potentially a maker. Although someone would expect only enthusiasts to look forward into turning into makers, when the slightest comment can affect the narration of a story, it is possible for anyone to participate in the ever-produsing hive mind.

Such social extensions of a case (meaning a stream gaining such a big coverage in ‘real life’, and even having other productions made out of it), echo van Dijck’s general claim that “technology shapes sociality as much as sociality shapes technology; we can partly trace this process through user reactions (34): Twitch’s technology shaped sociality by allowing these nearly 70,000 spectators to live and participate in an endeavor that anyone of them could interfere to, and at the same time offering ‘food for thought’ for fan art and interpersonal discussions, while sociality shaped Twitch’s technology by constant feedback to the stream either in the form of submitted content (emoticons, logos etc.) or forcing the maker to perform modifications and improvements (the democracy vs. anarchy system).

3.2. Comparison: further discussion of the results

3.2.1. Main findings

Big communities like these highlighted here make use of four forms that Jenkins notes of participatory culture. Affiliations, because there are numerous members centered around mediated communities and platforms; expressions, because members produce new creative forms; Collaborative problem solving, since many members work together towards the completion of a common goal; Circulations, since the shape a flow by acts like creating blog entries and podcasts (Jenkins et al. 9). If these four forms define participatory culture, then undisputedly original fan-made audiovisual content and streaming belong there.

To offer a better understanding on the formation of user-generated content communities on the Internet, I should explore Kate Fosk’s claims on machinima and its spread. In the article Machinima is Growing Up (2011), Kate Fosk lists four reasons why she believes machinima, a filmmaking practice based on preexisting computer and video game graphics, can go mainstream soon. Although I will not examine this argument here, looking at Fosk’s analysis can show some previously unnoticed aspects of online fan projects and their communities. Machinima’s accessibility is one of them. The aspiring filmmaker is not alone in his/her attempt to create an animation. There is a huge network of fora, video tutorials and ‘hubs’ which
a beginner can use to obtain advice and information. The online machinima community “has a culture of sharing skills and knowledge” (Fosk 27). On the titular website, machinima.com, anyone can register as a member and benefit from an interaction with many already established machinima producers and animators. Such networks of communication are also available on fora like machinination.com.

The second characteristic according to Fosk is what I describe as ‘machinima’s dual nature’. Machinima is suitable both for the individual filmmaker and the online team. Due to machinima’s convenient (as claimed by Fosk) tools, creators can make a film on their own undertaking all traditional roles of animation filmmaking (animating, voice-over etc.), or they can collaborate as a part of a bigger team (27). An editor from the Netherlands can receive material to be edited by an animator from the United States, and then add music from a French composer. When the video is finalized, it is uploaded on the Internet for the whole world to see. This point supports clearly that produsage may remove limitations such as language or geography, provide tools for the development and maintenance of networks, and create environments of collaborative behaviour (Bruns, From Production to Produsage 3).

The third reason she believes that machinima is ready to go mainstream concerns the easiness of sharing content. Not only can a filmmaker showcase a film, but he/she is able to connect with corresponding niches: ‘unlike a classic cinema experience, the creator and viewer are much more in contact” (Fosk 27). Platforms like YouTube and many fora help machinima creators present themselves to the public and provide environments where people can help one another. In addition, nowadays many festivals and awards are established honoring machinima’s best and motivating the new creators to improve (Fosk 28). This is because machinima awards and festivals are expected to work as any regular award ceremony or festival: people get to showcase their works, meet other people, discuss potential ideas and get motivation for their next project.

The fourth and final characteristic mentioned by Fosk has to do with distribution. It is impossible to distribute your work and make it go viral without the use of web platforms. After all, most of the popular video hosting websites allow people to upload or view content for free. Those websites that do not, try to keep the cost at low levels, such as Screw Attack. Fosk states that low to none distribution costs “coupled with machinima’s budget production costs, minimize the risk of experimenting” (28). Add to this the simplicity of promoting something online by services like social media
platforms, and you have a community ready to watch your production.

To sum things up, Fosk sees machinima as a new filmmaking practice, one that is open to anyone, easy to create, easy to share and one that links people from all over the world. So, if a user-generated content method, like making films with video game graphics, can benefit from all this, possibly other productions can too.

And this is true for both my case studies (in addition DEATH BATTLE! is in itself some kind of machinima). User-generated content based on popular culture is accessible for anyone to make, it can be created by a single person or a team, connects users from all over the world, and can be spread easily on the Internet. DEATH BATTLE! and Twitch Plays Pokémon makers have used (and still use) the Internet to strike collaborations with other makers and get information, connect to numerous communities, and promote and distribute their work.

We have seen in the analysis that joining the community is easy, free and simple. But in order to climb the ranks, recognition needs to be attained. It could be pointed out that there is always one main maker who acts as the community’s leader (Wiz and Boomstick or the TwitchPlaysPokemon owner), but other makers can appear at any time, creating their own content based on pre-existing user-generated content. However, nothing guarantees that their content would be successful too, echoing Kate Fosk’s warning of “getting lost in the crowd” (28), bringing forth questions of skill set and the debate of elitists vs. populists as described by Hills. Fosk who—as I mentioned here- has been very supportive of user-generated content going mainstream is, nevertheless, sceptical of distribution matters. She believes that although it is easy to create, due to the fact there are lots of it spread continuously online, not all content will get noticed. About that case, there is the possibility of anyone creating and having fun within their circle of friends, but if they want to address to a larger audience, matters of skill should be definitely taken into consideration; much like DEATH BATTLE!-clones: many have been produced, but only those that took themselves seriously stood the test of time, like Bat in the Sun, proving that—at least for this case-good works are not only appreciated, but can also remain durable instead of ephemeral. From that, it seems that indeed some skills sets are required for a production, not only to become distinguished, but even spark its own series. DEATH BATTLE! became widespread because it offered to fans what they wanted: answers to everlasting debates (or reasons to complain about) styled with enjoyable animation and narration. Twitch Plays Pokémon took matters of collaboration, fragmentation and
belonging and applied them to a game that anyone can play—and used expert game modification skills to do so.

Whether simple fan, enthusiast of any kind, maker, leader or a simple passerby, a member of a community can move fluidly from one category to another, depending on the situation and the goals; “members may shift from one community to another as their interests and needs change, and they may belong to more than one community at the same time” (Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* 137).

The categorization proposed here, although applicable, should by no means be considered as strict and fixed. It can be used to highlight specific occurrences at a specific time. Members themselves challenge any categorization, as when, for instance, makers decide to spend time interacting with their followers. *ScrewAttack*’s crew members have been seen to do this kind of engagement. Some of them have been spotted answering and commentating with the audience in videos like the *Iron Man VS Lex Luthor* battle (2015).

Another trait of a community that is very crucible and could be added to those proposed by Axel Bruns is the collaboration between different fan communities. “Fans”, according to Jenkins, “see unrealized potentials in popular culture and want to broaden audience participation. Fan culture is dialogic rather than disruptive, affective more than ideological, and collaborative rather than confrontational” (*Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, 150). *DEATH BATTLE!* creators, since their show started getting attention, started collaborating with other communities so that their analyses are as accurate as possible. Their objective of creating battles based on the “weapons, armour and skills” (as announced in the introduction of the episodes) of each participant could not be easy without the involvement of a large team that backs the project. This is why on all their newer videos of *DEATH BATTLE!* Ben and Chad always thank other people in the end credits that carried out the research and presented the stories, feats and abilities for the creators to use. This manner permits a linking between communities, with one extending over to the other, and the ‘forging’ of an ‘alliance’.

One notable example is the Goku VS Superman battle. The video is a take on the highly-debated and fan-dividing topic of a hypothetical battle to the end between the famous superhero Superman and Goku, the protagonist of the *Dragon Ball* franchise. This fight has been heavily discussed in online fan fora for years and many makers offered their take on the debate (including an *Epic Rap Battles of History* music
video), mainly because of the similar story of the two participants. Superman –born Kal-El- was sent from planet Krypton –a few moments before it was destroyed- to Earth, and gradually discovered his superhuman powers, only to turn into Earth’s mightiest champion. Similarly, Goku was sent from planet Vegeta –which was destroyed too– to Earth and became one of its biggest defenders with the use of his superpowers. Therefore, these two stories of extraterrestrials coming to Earth, growing fond of its population, and ultimately saving it on numerous occasions from dangers, made fans of both franchises to often compare Goku and Superman.

When the video was to be made, *DEATH BATTLE!* creators turned for help with the analysis to multiple communities that have expert knowledge on the worlds of Superman and DC Comics, and Dragon Ball. This is why, when the video starts (which, due to the magnitude of the battle, has a different, more cinematesque introduction) in the opening credits we see ScrewAttack mentioning to be in collaboration with Kanzenshuu (a website claiming to be “the perfect Dragon Ball database & community”), Superman Homepage, The Dao of Dragon Ball, Superman Super Site and Team Fourstar: five expert fan communities that collaborated with the ScrewAttack community to bring this project into being. In addition, voice actors MasakoX and ItsJustSomeRandomGuy were used for the voice of the characters, whereas the Blake Robinson Synthetic Orchestra, a project by video game music composer Blake Robinson, was in charge of the soundtrack. The same occurs with the TwitchPlaysPokemon channel in which the streamer always thanks nominally all those that have contributed, as I described in my case study.

In such cases, collaboration sometimes brings division between different categories of fans is more apparent here. Fans create subcommunities within an already-existent community, allowing for elevation for some (the popular members) or a fracture as Reinhard (2013) called it.

**3.2.2. Evaluation of theory**

José van Dijck’s disassembly of platforms is quite useful. A platform cannot be studied just as a singular entity. Many parts comprise it, which constantly lead to each other, making a full circle. In this analysis I selected technology, users/usage and content, leaving out business models, governance and ownership, since I decided to focus more on the shaping of communities around user-generated content, which has to do more with the three first parts. However, issues like branding, making money
out of user-generated content and community regulations bring constantly the rest of
the parts (business models, governance and ownership) into play, proving that the
dissasemblage of platforms is a useful model to examine participatory culture and
user-generated content, a model characterized by fluidity, just like the other models
used in this analysis. Original content and streamings are both two categories of user-
generated content that, like all kinds of participatory culture, can be broken down in
 techno-cultural and socioeconomic parts. What could be said here is that since -unlike
other projects that probably have economic aspirations- fan-based user-generated
content is mainly made for fun and entertainment purposes –or at least it starts that
way. Of course, in the meantime, money earning goals are more than likely to enter
the flow of each project.

Produsage is one of the biggest bases in fan cultures. Any fan of a popular culture
franchise is expected to have been exposed to fan-made user-generated content at
least once. And since that kind of content is made by a fan/set of fans, being
distributed online and being described by matters of open participation and
evaluation, continuing processes, heterarchy and meritocracy, and communal
property, these artifacts belong to the produsaging as described by Axel Bruns, but at
the same time leading towards a previously unexplored aspect, that of intercommunal
collaboration, that is linking and collaboration among different communities –
different fandoms- in a non-competitive mood, for the achievement of a common
goal. Maybe in shared knowledge projects like blogs or Wikipedia some communities
are working together, but in fan cultures it is even more significant when enthusiasts
of two (or more) different franchises come together and collaborate solely for
entertainment purposes. This is because in knowledge sharing communities rivalries
and confrontations are not much expected as they would be in a forum with people
discussing –intensively- whether Iron Man is able to defeat Batman without the use of
his super suit, or if Eddard Stark did right to confront the Queen in the seventh
episode of the first season of Game of Thrones (2011-ongoing). Not all produsage
cultures are the same then. Axel Bruns offers an extensive view to produsage
communities, but with a focus away from fandom. Examining produsage aspects of
fan cultures highlights these new aspects not visible before.

The tripartite model of productivity, about two decades after its introduction, is
still relevant, but it can neither be fruitful without taking into consideration the
comments by Matt Hills and all the other authors Hills mentions, nor can it stand on
its own on a complex field like today’s digital media are. This is mainly because of the issues that are pointed out by Hills: matters of hierarchy, along with the difficulty of defining when exactly an artefact is ‘semiotic’, ‘enunciative’ and/or ‘textual’ productivity. In this research, I observed that what Hills said about not fluid categories is very applicable on online communities. For instance, in the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* stream, in which thousands of players enter commands at the same time to a video game emulated live, there is semiotic productivity at the moment of someone’s exposure to the stream. Then, visitors might choose to proceed in enunciative and textual productivity by participating or by spreading the stream. In addition, some people might get inspired by it, and either contribute to the community (this particular community allows for contribution by either donating money or sending fan-made material), thus progressing to a new kind of textual productivity; user-generated content based on other user-generated content.
Conclusion

Summary

The two examples presented here showcase how a fan-made project makes use of technical elements of their platforms, in order to build a community. Both *DEATH BATTLE!* and *Twitch Plays Pokémon* are open for viewing, but constantly encourage viewers to engage with activities like subscribing or sharing their content, thus attempting to transform the passersby and simple fans to enthusiasts. Then, the next step would be to ‘lure’ the enthusiast to become advantageous enthusiast, by offering exclusive benefits only to those who pay the additional fee. In any way, advantageous or not, an individual can become very easily a part of a large community.

Regarding sociality and the affordances proposed by Axel Bruns, both communities are open for anyone to participate and their artefacts are part of an ongoing, continuing process. Even so, they also present some differences compared to Bruns’s affordances. Content like this is always made by a main maker (or leader), therefore hierarchy (or heterarchy) does not work in the same way a shared knowledge community would work. In addition, shared knowledge is something no one can claim as property, but when talking about popular media franchises, characters and events, then issues of property cannot be ignored.

Both projects are textual productivities since they are based on popular culture productions. These projects are observed to play with all parts of fan productivity at the same time. Fans and passersby of these textual productivities/projects engage into semiotic and enunciative productivity while watching. Then, they are encouraged to proceed into textual productivity by participating with suggestions (in the case of *DEATH BATTLE!* ) or by inputs and narrative shaping (in the case of *Twitch Plays Pokémon*). However, many of them proceed into more complex textual productivity by either contributing with content, or making their own projects based on these examples.
A fan is not a unique entity. A fan needs to belong and share. After all, one of the central characteristics of being a fan is translating regular viewing into a cultural activity, sharing feelings and joining a community (Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* 41). Many fans see their entry as a movement from an isolated life to an alternative pleasure, as an entrance to a community receptive to their preferences, a community where they feel they belong (Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* 41). So, one more trait that should be added to those proposed by Bruns, is the building, shaping and maintenance of an imagined community. Benedict Anderson explained that by the circulation of printed material in one’s language, people got to realise that there are others like them, speaking the same language and sharing the same interests. Although, in these cases there is not printed material involved, people do realise that out there exist others like them that speak the same ‘language’ –if not literally, then in terms of fandom. Fandoms are, and have always been, both ‘imagined’ and ‘imagining’ communities, years before networked computers were even introduced (Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* 137), so now with high-speed Internet access in the mix, fan communities get even stronger. Furthermore, José van Dijck argues that users value user-generated content and social network sites “as means to express themselves and present themselves to others” (34), stressing out that they enable them to connect, belong and find others like them.

It is important what Axel Bruns describes as the outcome of newer technologies, the ability for the “emergence of genuine horizontal collaboration between users, and for the formation of user communities, especially where sufficient functionality was available to make users aware of each other’s activities and to help them coordinate their collaborations” (*From Prosumption to Produsage*, 67). This awareness of users that there are other people around them with the same interests, speaking the same ‘language’ and occupying themselves with the same ‘business’ could be considered as a similar awareness of the one experienced by a participant in an imaginary community I described earlier in this essay. Although now not necessarily religious or national ideas are involved, an individual *Star Wars* fan living in a remote village in Italy, knows that there are other people, millions of them, in the world sharing the same passion, and not only that, but now they can also connect, and –even better- create content together.
Produsage removes limitations such as language or geography, provides tools for the development and maintenance of networks, and creates environments of collaborative behaviour (Bruns, *From Production to Produsage* 3). Still, what I cannot ignore is that these limitations still play some role. Fans of all categories that may not speak fluently English cannot properly follow a big community. Especially, in the case of *DEATH BATTLE!*, there have been user-generated subtitlings of the videos Spanish. Also, geography can play an important role, since in communities that sometimes go live (like Twitch streams and occasional live streamings of content, like the live *DEATH BATTLE!*), local time can be proven an obstacle: if an important event is going to take place in *Twitch Plays Pokémon* at 21:00pm PST, a European fan might have difficulties following it. The same occurs with other live streamings. Of course, a fan can catch a replay, but will miss the live participation (they are streamed live for a reason), thus limiting the experience.

Still, although such limitations exist, they are not enough to downgrade online fan communities. Reinhard has noticed fragmentation among fans, and Bruns has warned about aggressive behaviour, but such things exist in offline life too, and should be expected. Anyway, it is proven that people are not alone in their fandoms and they can participate too, or even create if they feel so. Sometimes, they might even make money out of it.

**Limitations/ Suggestions for further research**

I feel, though, that this analysis is not exhausting. The main limitation this analysis has, is on its focus. Although I decided to explore two of the most well-known examples of audiovisual fan-made online content, more categories of fan-related user-generated content exist, like podcasts or written fanfiction. Furthermore, while examining my two case studies, I also observed some other practices taking place, not directly related to my research: fan exploitation, moneymaking and the creation of fan-based archives. Communities are not based or defined by these practices, but such tendencies cannot be ignored, and will be given a brief mention, but not a thorough analysis.
**Communities exploiting (and exploited)**

One can locate a peculiar trait in these communities: when a community uses its members to carry out the labour leaders should carry. Fan labour has been known to include productive activities carried out by fans, mainly those following popular culture. Now, a newer trend exists when this labour is still being carried out by fans, but – paradoxically – because other fans, mainly leaders or makers belonging to a fan community asked them to.

According to John Caldwell, large media conglomerates used then-newly established platforms for marketing reasons (285-292); for example, they proclaimed contests, calling users to create their own videos, and users – hoping to win some recognition - responded by offering free labour and doing a job that normally would have cost money, all that for promises of wealth and fame. However, what remains the most important result of this practice, is the fact that it pushed companies to embrace crowdsourcing and start including it in their business strategies. Nowadays, this practice is still taking place, but what is noteworthy is the fact that it is also taking place in a user environment. Users, mainly leaders of a community, address to their followers or fellow fans for inspiration, ideas or even already made content.

This has been happening in both categories that I examined here: streaming and original content. The way fans do this can be further broken down in two main types: requests or demands, and content submission.

The main aggregator is the comments section, in which fans can ask for anything they would like to see featured in a future work of the respective series. This is mainly happening on videos who feature the ‘What would you like to see in the future?’ part. I have already mentioned how One Minute Melee videos start by showing screenshots of fights requested by fans, and then immediately proceeding to the episode. Some other very popular series are functioning the same way, like the Epic Rap Battles of History music comedy series that has its videos always end with the ‘Who’s next?’ line, motivating the audience to write their suggestions for future videos on the comments section, often followed by a screenshot of numerous previous suggestions of a video that has already happened, in order to show that the makers indeed listen to their viewers. Even knowing that the chances are very slight of being noticed, especially in popular videos that gather thousands and thousands of comments, they keep doing it, often getting responses and ‘likes’ or ‘dislikes’ by fellow fans. The fact
that a small discussion is started on the comments section among the fans – even if the uploader is not involved - fortifies the perception of belonging to a community with people that speak the same ‘language’ with the commenter, and also fortifies the concept of the ‘bazaar’ I mentioned earlier, since every user that suggests/demands/asks for something is trying to make his/her voice heard and be the one that inspires the maker.

Another way fans carrying out the labour of makers is by sending already made content to the community leader or maker. For instance, the long-going series of *the Angry Video Game Nerd* opened its 46th episode in a different manner. Instead of its usual intro song, there were shown excerpts of other people – fans- of the series playing in the song in numerous ways: from traditional guitars or singing to a version made by the *Mario Paint Composer* programme, and voicebox, only to be followed by the tagline “What have we started?” (2013).

Sometimes, fans take it a step further and manage to get their content into the subculture itself. The content they create manages to become viral within their circles and, by its turn, inspires for more content. One very popular – and often ‘hunted’ for copyright reasons- web series is *Botchamania*. Made by a user with the nickname *Maffew*, it consists of videos depicting ‘botched’ (failed or unsuccessful) moves and incidents of pro wrestling, along with any other funny moments of that spectacle. For the past years, every episode of *Botchamania* ends with a ‘*Botchamania ending*’, that is a clip of a funny moment or a botched move remixed and edited with another video or sound clip, in order to make a joke. This tendency inspired other users to create similar videos and send them to *Maffew* for future appearances on *Botchamania*. In addition to that, phrases and jokes used in *Botchamania* videos are also used frequently on online communities and content, as well as shouted by the audience on actual pro wrestling shows.

*Having fun and making money*

Given the fact that – as I mentioned – this analysis is interested on the techno-cultural aspects of the case studies, the economics and business models of such platforms are not the main focus of this thesis, but it is difficult to ignore a tendency that has been occurring lately in big fan communities, especially because all aspects are interconnected and somehow dependent on each other. The concept of moneymaking
is very prominent in these kinds of user-generated content, therefore I should make a brief mention on how these communities, after having grown significantly, were able to brand themselves and make some money for their leaders.

First of all, *DEATH BATTLE!* makers proceeded to immediate branding by releasing t-shirts with the show’s logo on them. The way they selected to promote them was none other than the style of a traditional *DEATH BATTLE!* episode: in 2011 they made a video, like a regular battle, in which they show their t-shirt going against all other t-shirts in the world and defeating them. In addition, although not directly related to the show’s brand name, many episodes have featured a sponsor whose name is mentioned during the episode. To add to the ways that a show can cash its fame to earn something, the sponsors featured on the episodes, allowed *DEATH BATTLE!* viewers to have a discount if they used a promo code mentioned during that particular sponsor message (e.g. DEATHBATTLE). Plus, it should not be forgotten that *DEATH BATTLE!* cashed on its fame to attract subscribers –advantageous enthusiasts- by encouraging them to subscribe to the host site *ScrewAttack*. Also, one particular episode from 2013, the fight between Shao Kahn (*Mortal Kombat*) and M. Bison (*Street Fighter*) has an alternate ending available only to subscribers.

*Twitch Plays Pokémon* did not officially produce merchandise, although fan-made items can be found online (another example of something fan-made being based on another fan-made project). However, as mentioned earlier, in case someone wanted to support the stream, subscription options were available. The streamer did not produce any merchandise, but made some money from subscriptions and adds on the stream, the total amount he/she is not allowed by Twitch to reveal (*Twitch-Plays-Pokemon 2015*).

Very important is the way these projects turn out as employment opportunities for Pro-Ams. I have already made reference to people trying to showcase their work by creating user-generated content, in hopes of getting employed in the future. Fan communities are full of such examples. In my study, there can be no greater example than *DEATH BATTLE!* itself. Creator and host Ben Singer, along with co-host Chad James are employed by *ScrewAttack*, whereas animator Torrian Crawford, after contributing animations in a number of episodes, recently became hired by *ScrewAttack*, with the ‘good news’ being officially announced during the live *DEATH
BATTLE! broadcast. It seems that occupation with such ‘hobbies’ that only a certain body of people like and appreciate (fans) can sometimes turn out fruitful.

**Shared knowledge and fan-based archives**

Many franchises, series, games, even fan projects, like *DEATH BATTLE!* and *The Angry Video Game Nerd*, have their own wikis. Although Wikipedia is the most known example of a wiki, a community based on the circulation of free knowledge, there are also these wikis, a big number of them not officially affiliated with the works they are referring to, and run by fans. So what we have here is a remarkable case of fans generating content for other user-generated content. This spiral is part of a longer series of fans assisting other fans with their user-generated content. The first part is when fans help with suggestions and comments. The second is the circulation of knowledge and the third is the direct contribution with content (e.g. fans sending content to community leaders/makers to help them).

José van Dijck notices that Wikipedia’s contributors have, at least initially, been mostly professionals—people that had expert knowledge on the topic they wrote about (135). Well, this is not the case on those fan wikis. These wikis are totally maintained by fans, since no professional knowledge is required for someone to write articles for them, only devotion and occupation with the subject.

Also, these wikis offer an option Wikipedia does not so visibly: comments. Any user can use the comments section below to express an opinion and/or start a larger discussion. Wikipedia allows for comments, but only at a special section. Fan-made wikis mainly have the comments section directly at the end of an article, allowing for a discussion to start immediately after the reading has ended.

Therefore, what we have here is a user-generated content based on user-generated content, fan labour based on other fan labour, and a community that came to existence because of another community.

**More questions**

While observing all the above more questions come to mind. As I stated in the second chapter, techno-cultural and socioeconomic elements of platforms are tightly interrelated, and this is shown in the case studies. What starts as a fan project, can
easily make use of platforms that allow for monetary gain and elevation of professional status. Therefore, what is the socioeconomic side of user-generated content? What administrative, branding and exploitation issues can add to online fan communities, and what can we learn from it? Such matters might have required a different theoretical framework and other tools of analysis, making things more complex. More categories and other aspects might have highlighted more obscure matters of fan communities and productivity. I am sure this is material for a potential future research, and I hope that this paper can assist as a starting point.
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