

Feedback-Seeking in Online Fanfiction Communities

Human Centered Design & Engineering Research Showcase 2019

Jenna Frens
jfrens@uw.edu

Regina Cheng
rcheng6@uw.edu

Erin Walker
eawalker@pitt.edu

Gary Hsieh
garyhs@uw.edu

Cecilia Aragon
aragon@uw.edu

Abstract

People in fanfiction communities make new connections, build relationships and exchange feedback through a cross-section of online social channels as they produce creative work. In this study, we interviewed fanfiction writers to uncover how they overcome social and technological challenges to feedback-seeking. We discuss how writers leverage the right strategies, social channels, and people to support their writing as they participate in the fanfiction ecosystem.

Background & Community Description

Fanfiction communities are spaces of amateur creativity that span an ecosystem of social technologies. Known for their *participatory culture* that encourages participation and *distributed mentoring*, the networked exchange of feedback and support, fanfiction communities provide millions of writers with opportunities to get exposure and feedback. As we found, this feedback exchange happens through a variety of *social and communication channels*, crossing boundaries between websites, social media platforms, and even online and offline worlds:

FFN, AO3, LiveJournal, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Discord, email, Drive, Slack, Dreamwidth, DeviantArt, Google Doc, Messenger, Phone, In-person



RQ1: Multiple social channels & ways for effective feedback-seeking

| For What | To whom | How | Channel Exps |
|---|--|---|--------------|
| Bouncing ideas | Irl; close online fandom friends | "Talking it through" | |
| Affirmation & motivation | Close online fandom friends | Sending in-progress clips | |
| Early stage directional feedback, new ideas | Members of online fandom community | Sending/ posting in-progress clips | |
| Plot level question, clarification & explanations | Beta readers familiar with the work & author | Sending a draft, discussing in comment thread, live chatting while reading | |
| Inline edits & specific constructive feedback | General beta readers | Sending a draft | |
| Comments for published work | General fandom audience | Authors notes, proper tagging, cross-posting, posting preview on social media | |

RQ2: Barriers to seeking feedback

Barrier 1

Difficulty finding and joining the right community

Barrier 2

Difficulty identifying the right people to ask

Barrier 3

Social anxiety of reaching out

"When I first started off and I was asking for beta readers... it was difficult because not everybody knew or the people I was asking didn't know how to beta read yet... They didn't always turn out exactly the way I wanted." -P3

"I've never really had a beta reader or editor type person... I don't know where to ask." -P12

"I have never reached out to anyone, those famous authors. I mean, I would love to do that but I don't want to bother them... It's almost like reaching out to a celebrity." -P9

RQ3: Connecting on multiple social channels helps feedback-seeking

- Trusting relationships are needed for deep critique

"[The story is] very forced... That coming cold from someone would have been a bit crushing, but because obviously I already formed that connection and that friendship and it was for someone that I knew and trusted from working together and chatting... ultimately it was a positive experience that otherwise might have seemed like a negative one." -P1

- Community collaborative writing events help people connect with feedback providers

"Usually every fest has a slack or a discord, so you can talk to the other people who are in that fest... people will leave little snippets and ask for advice, or they'll just drop [a link] in and you can say 'sounds interesting' or 'question on this part.'" -P13

- Connections move across public and private channels

"I started posting [fic] and people commented, and I replied because I thought it was polite. A couple of my regular readers said 'oh you should get a tumblr,' so I did. We started messaging each other." -P13

- Moving to close-knit communities helps people get to know each other's strength and preferences

"I sort of have the reputation in the communities I am in, in the two Discord servers, that if you need characterization help, come to me; if you need grammar help, come to some other person. 'Cause if you have been there for so long, you will build up things like that." -P9

RQ1 What are the feedback-seeking practices of fanfiction writers?

RQ2 What are the challenges fanfiction writers face in their feedback-seeking?

RQ3 How do fanfiction writers leverage social and communication channels to overcome these challenges?

Methods

- Conducted 29 one-hour semi-structured interviews.
- Coded interview transcripts using a grounded theory methodology, iteratively built a qualitative coding set and thematically categorized codes using an affinity diagram.
- Wrote memos to synthesize ideas from the interviews and connected these memos to the coding set, transforming the qualitative data into a theory of social, informal feedback-seeking.

Implications

- Connections and relationships** are essential to facilitating critique, evolve across multiple channels and spaces
- Writers leveraged **multiple social channels** to meet their feedback needs because a single platform could not provide everything
- Overlapping fanfiction subcommunities distributed across online spaces demonstrate the existence of an **affinity ecology**