

Crowdfunding NSFW Video Game Fan Art

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The Rule 34 “If it exists, there is a porn of it. No exceptions.” (see Doctorow, 2011, p. 70) also applies to video game culture. Despite Ken Levine’s requests to stop BioShock porn on DeviantArt (Good, 2013), erotic and pornographic fan art will not cease to exist. On the contrary, artists have recently discovered the crowdfunding service Patreon which allows them to create NSFW fan art on a greater scale and more “professionally”.

Crowdfunding of pornographic fan art is challenging many traditional boundaries of fan cultures. First, it is in conflict with the idea that fan cultures are shared for free among fans in a system of (digital) gift economy (see Barbrook, 2005; Booth, 2010). However, this traditional assumption of fan studies scholars and enthusiasts does not apply universally. Commercially sold physical fan artworks are acceptable in fandom (see the variety of fan artifacts offered on Etsy), while selling fan fiction is considered problematic, to say the least (Jones, 2014). While there is a strong tradition of fan art commissions on community websites (such as DeviantArt), Patreon projects often fund primarily digital fan art which makes these crowdfunding efforts questionable in the context of fannish gift culture.

Secondly, many forms of fan cultures are embraced by the creators of canonical works. Fan creations are featured in video games, for example as collectibles in *Mortal Kombat X* (2015), or on social media profiles and official websites (BioWare, 2015). However, Levine’s stance suggests that pornographic fan art is not welcome at these official platforms. Therefore, NSFW art is tucked into rather obscure dedicated online archives which often contain “Rule 34” in their title and Tumblr pages of the individual authors, creating a quasi-secret network of porn fan art creators and connoisseurs.

Lastly, fan cultures in general have to operate within very vague legislation, at least in US where the major video game copyright holders reside. According to Aaron Schwabach, this situation where “neither fans nor content owners truly understand the boundaries of fair use in fan works, benefits neither” (2013, p. 92). In consequence, fans and fan artists have the misconception that every non-profit artwork falls under the fair use doctrine. However, the potential profit is only a minor factor determining the conditions of fair use. Much more important is the level of transformativity (in opposition to derivativity) of fan cultures. Parodies are one of the transformative works that fall under the fair use doctrine.

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Given the fact that most mainstream video games contain only very subtle nudity, if they contain it all, the transformative aspect seems to be fulfilled by some NSFW fan art creators. However, we should still keep in mind that while video games as whole cannot be effectively protected by copyright laws, signature characters, objects and plots are the exceptions (Lastowka, 2013). The NSFW fan art is based exactly on portraying the popular video game characters in erotic or pornographic context. However, as also Schwabach (2013) points out it is very hard to decide what is and what is not a fair use before an actual court's verdict.

These three issues serve as a starting point of a discourse analysis that will focus on artists searching for funding on Patreon. I will particularly explore the way they justify the existence and ethics of their project and explain the pornographic aspects of their work (Brown, 2013), but I will also look at the actual fan creations. To better understand the ethos of crowdfunding of NSFW fan art, I will also investigate artists who still use the more traditional model of art commissions.

Preliminary findings based on a discourse analysis of 20 Patreon projects suggest that these crowdfunding projects exhibit variety on many levels. First, the number of patrons range from nearly 2 000 of the most successful Studio FOW which was also featured on the gaming news website Kotaku (Hernandez, 2015), to dozens of smaller projects. Also the overall style of communication differs greatly – from explicitly pornographic jargon of “fapping” to more subtle “adult animations” or even admittedly romantic “loving asaris”. The actual need for patronage is often explained as means to increase the volume and regularity of fan art creations and also increased complexity of the animations. However, the ultimate goal in many cases is to become a full-time creator although this notion collides with the general assumption that fandom is a voluntary free-time activity fueled mostly by love for the object of a given fandom.

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