

## Considering Collaborative Creativity

*Thessa Jensen*

*Ph.D. associate professor, InDiMedia, Aalborg University, Denmark. Jensen's research revolves around the ethics of the Danish theologian and philosopher Knud E. Løgstrup. Her focus is how design can support co-creation and collaboration, as well as helping develop relationships between users on social media sites.*

### **Abstract**

This article develops a framework for understanding the creation of online content on social media sites. Focusing on creativity and its social context, the study is narrowed to the field of fanfiction and fanfiction sites. Using the Systems Model of Creativity by Csikszentmihalyi as a template, this article analyses roles, processes, and products found in fanfiction communities and on fanfiction sites. The specific needs for motivation and support of especially the writer and the collective (Thomas & Brown, 2011) surrounding them are looked upon and compared to the present functionality and usability of the fanfiction sites in question. Further, I elaborate on how the infrastructure of the different sites, as well as their possibilities for interaction, encourage or discourage collaborative creativity, as well as participation in the development of the stories. Finally, a modified Systems Model is presented, containing the preliminary findings.

*Keywords* social media, fanfiction, creativity, collaboration, co-creation.

## Writing fanfiction

As an avid, if inexperienced, reader of fanfiction, I have always wondered how it was possible that so many people would spend time and effort researching and writing their stories, only to be published online without any kind of monetary reward or fame, except for a few so-called big name fans, BNFs (Driscoll, 2006, p. 93). Even then, BNFs will typically only be recognised by their online identity, their pseudonym, keeping their real-life persona anonymous. Why do writers spend hours, days, months, and even years writing and publishing stories online? Why do they expose themselves to the vulnerability inherent in showing their fantasies and ideas to fan communities on sites like fanfiction.net (FFnet), archive-of-our-own.org (AO3), or livejournal.com (lj)?

Using an autoethnographical approach (boyd, 2008; Ellis et al., 2011), this article is based on my experiences through the last two and a half years as a part of the *Sherlock* BBC fandom. I was taken by surprise when I saw the first episode of the modernisation of the original Sherlock Holmes stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, since I thought it was impossible to trump Jeremy Brett's performance in the Granada television series. I soon discovered the online fandom. After lurking in the shadows of anonymity for eight months, I wrote my very first comment on a fanfiction that I had, by then, read and re-read several times.

It took another year before I was ready to write, finish, and publish my own fanfiction. I crossed several perceived boundaries in the process and, even now, wonder what made me do it. How did the balance between wanting to write for an audience outweigh the fear of exposing myself to the scrutiny of much more experienced writers, readers, and fans in the community?

Publishing the first chapter was a milestone, but persevering through the following months of writing, editing, and re-writing turned the experience into so much more than just writing a story. Simultaneously fearing and welcoming every single comment, watching the hits and kudos rise in numbers, and comparing statistics on the different sites with another all became factors. While I had seen other writers having an almost symbiotic connection with some of their readers, I had never thought I would experience anything like what happened in these months of writing. I was not alone. The readers were cheering me on, and several comments

gave me a boost whenever I was low on motivation. I had spent more than six months outlining the story in a notebook with bits and pieces of text, dialogue, and backstories, as well as writing several parts of a handbook, which was referred to in the finished story. I thought I knew how the story would end and how the characters would develop their relationship with each other. It turned out, the reactions from 'my' readers made me change part of the plot, ultimately deepening characterisations and exploring parts of the story I hadn't expected to be of any interest.

Since then, I have become more actively involved in fandom life. But still, I wonder why I am writing, commenting on stories, blogging, and re-blogging posts. I feel uneasy whenever initiating an interaction or responding to an inquiry. While much of this could be attributed to me being new to fandom life, I have found that comments, emails, and responses show that even experienced fans have some of the same fears.

During the past years, many questions and very few answers have entered my mind. In the following, I will try to give a possible framework to understand part of the creative process that seems to drive fanfiction writers.

### **Creativity**

"Any definition of creativity that aspires to objectivity, and therefore requires an intersubjective dimension, will have to recognize the fact that the audience is as important to its constitution as the individual to whom it is credited." (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006/2013, p. 3)

With the advent of the Internet and especially social media sites (boyd & Ellison, 2008), the role of the audience has changed dramatically. Producer and consumer become a 'prosumer' as foreseen by Toffler (1980), both roles interchanging when user-generated content is published on the Internet. While fanfiction in its early days was written for and distributed through fanfiction magazines, so called fanzines (Coppa, 2006; Busse & Hellekson, 2012), sites like FFnet, founded in 1997, and lj, founded in 1998, were some of the first social media sites created and still in use today (boyd & Ellison, 2008).

Unlike Twitter and Facebook, fanfiction sites are not used to 'be seen', but rather to be 'recognised' in the sense of Løgstrup's sense of spontaneous life manifestations (Jensen, 2013, p. 244, 247) and

Thomas & Brown's (2011, p. 22) acknowledgement of the other user's product. According to Csikszentmihalyi (2006/2013, p. 7) creativity is defined by the recognition through the social system: "In order to be called creative, a new meme must be socially valued." Acknowledging a writer's fanfiction by reading and commenting changes its status from original to creative, rewarding the writer and increasing the story's value in the social system of the fandom in question.

Csikszentmihalyi's Systems Model takes the social context as well as the technology and culture into account when an individual is creative. Figure 1 shows the different elements of the system as well as their interconnectivity.

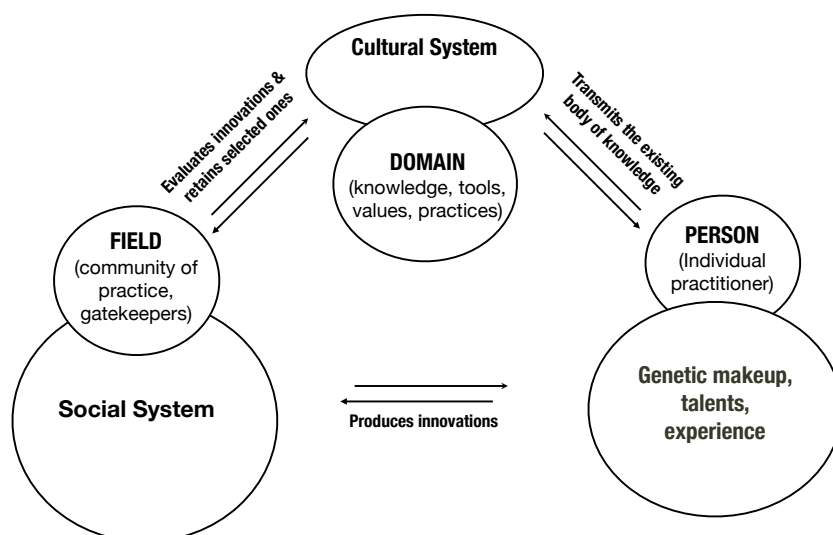


Figure 1: The Systems Model of creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006/2013, p. 4).

The cultural system consists of a set of domains that preserve the rules and the body of knowledge, techniques, values, and practices of each one. In this way, overarching fandom activity will be seen as the cultural system, while each specific fandom will be one domain, with, for example, Sherlock BBC as one domain, and the American television series Supernatural as another.

The field consists of the social system, this being made up of the actual people participating in the creation of material for the do-

main. The social system retains opinions, the community of practice as well as actual gatekeepers. In fandom, every single fan will be part of the field. Even fans who 'just' read fanfiction without commenting will be part of the evaluation of the work, since their click will be recorded in the tools of the domain, here the statistics on the fanfiction sites, and thus contribute to the feedback of the community to the individual writer.

While the field evaluates and selects the products and materials its participants deem worth keeping, the domain transmits the existing knowledge, including rules and values, to the individual practitioner. Since every story is archived on the fanfiction sites, the tools of the domain and the organisers of the sites, more than other fans or gatekeepers, retain the products of the individual. The field of fanfiction can be seen as a collective, where people gather freely to explore their passion for the characters of a media event on one hand and their passion for writing and telling stories on the other.

The individual, who is writing and reading fanfiction, has a genetic makeup, talents, and experiences that shape their way of participating in the domain of a given fandom, just as their opinions and actions will shape the field.

### **The Cultural System and its domains: Fandom and its specifics**

"Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool [...], so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation." (Dawkins, 2006, p. 192)

The cultural system is defined by its set of domains. Cultures differ in the way their memes are stored. Easy access to existing memes and easy development of new ones have an impact on the development of novelty production. With the Internet, the possibilities to store, share, and access information have become increasingly faster and easier than ever before. At the same time, the threshold for participation is lowered considerably, since the functionality and usability of sites like tumblr.com, Twitter, and Facebook have improved over time.

Fanfiction sites can be seen as the tools a fanfiction writer uses to publish and share their stories. The stories themselves become part

of the body of knowledge, together with the canon, which need to be stored, shared, and worked with.

Comparing sites like FFnet and AO3 shows how different the approaches to the values and practices of fanfiction communities are. FFnet can be compared to a 'cyber siberia' (Mitchell, 2000, p. 123), keeping any possibility to connect to other sites via links almost impossible. Linking is only allowed in the profile text of the user. Everywhere else, the user has to develop a workaround, if they want to include a link to another website. AO3, on the other hand, allows for any media incorporation into the story, both by embedding or linking away from the site itself.

Likewise, FFnet does not allow for other media to be incorporated in the text of story. The rigidity of FFnet has its value when used by new writers and young readers, since FFnet also uses a heavy-handed censorship on explicit sexual content. The last censorship campaign resulted in an exodus to AO3 (Milestones, 2012; AO3, 2012), whose policy differs widely from that of FFnet.

Where FFnet employs a set of rules, including a list of original works not to be used in fanfiction, AO3 uses a tagging system which both serves as a filter and a search-engine. Every writer has to tag their stories. Not the staff, but both readers and writers, will enforce the correct tagging strategy in order to avoid unwanted surprises. This ensures co-operation between reader and writer as well as a responsibility toward the audience that in this case lies with the writer.

On both sites, readers can comment on a story. FFnet only allows one 'review' per chapter, and the writer can only respond to a review via 'personal message'. If a writer wants to respond in public, they have to write 'an author's note' in the story without being able to set the note apart from the story text itself.

On AO3, a reader can write as many comments as they like to every chapter of a given story. The writer can respond in public, and other readers can respond and start a discussion as well. What is missing from AO3 is the possibility of responding in private.

Returning to Csikszentmihalyi's model, the above shows that fanfiction writers value their freedom when creating content. Accessibility of other sites and content, as well as a well-functioning search-engine, makes AO3 a fast growing fanfiction site, attracting both experienced and new writers and readers.



Easy to use, as well as featuring a functionality which takes the specific needs and wants of a writer and reader into account, AO3 is designed and developed by the users themselves. The Organisation of Transformative Works (OTW) is the organisation behind AO3, and it consists of users, researchers, and other interested parties who, among other things, work for legalisation of fanfiction (OTW, 2014).

### **The Social System and its field: A collective of fans and a community of practice**

“The stronger claim made here is that there is no way, even in principle, to separate the reaction of society from the person’s contribution. The two are inseparable. As long as the idea or product has not been validated, we might have originality, but not creativity.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006/2013, p. 7)

The social validation of fanfiction writers can be found in multiple ways. The writer themselves can use the statistical data, which every fanfiction site provides on different levels. AO3 shows hits without differentiating between unique visitors and number of hits, number of kudos, subscribers, and bookmarks. FFnet gives a more specific overview, differentiating between number of visitors, hits, hits on single chapters, number of reviews, favorites, and date. All of this provides positive feedback to the writer, and validates the story and the writer in the community.

Contrary to Csikszentmihalyi’s model, fanfiction as such does not have gatekeepers. While other fields have specialists or other gatekeepers to approve of new memes and new participants, fanfiction cannot live without new stories, memes, and alternative universes. A search on AO3 (15 July 2014) showed only 2,8% of the available stories having less than 20 hits, including new stories and multiple chapter stories. A story and its writer do not depend on BNFs to become known, but of course a recommendation or review will likely boost the number of readers.

Fanfiction needs a common ground found in canon, but this is expandable if a new meme shows potential for developing new storylines, new ways to describe the relationship between the characters, or in other ways gives new life to the fandom in question. Memes can even jump from fandom to fandom, thus pollinating fandoms that normally are unrelated.

Csikszentmihalyi's community of practice can be compared to Wenger's (1998, p. 7f) ditto. Both include an extrinsic motivation, for example, given through the need to earn a living or do well at exams. Wenger's communities of practice are defined by the active participation in the community, but none of his examples are based solely on free involvement in the community. This freedom of engagement is the core of any fan activity, and it is defining for the individual, whether writing or otherwise contributing to a fandom. While both Wenger's and Csikszentmihalyi's participants can be forced in some way or other, any use of coercion in the fanfiction community will result in less motivation and normally end the writing process. The difference can be explained through Thomas and Brown's notion of the collective, being "defined by an active engagement with the process of learning" (2011, p. 52). They continue to explain the difference between communities and collectives by collectives being active, and people belonging to collectives in order to learn, because they want to explore the subject they are interested in. A collective exists as long as there are people who actively engage in the collective and produce new material. Participation is needed one way or the other (ibid, 52f). This means, the readers and commenters have to give some kind of feedback if they want the story to progress and the writer to continue writing.

Thomas and Brown (2011, p. 22) have the following answer from a boy who plays Minecraft and is asked what the most important part of the game is: "[T]he single most important thing was 'not to be mean' in your comments and to make sure that you commented on something good when you came across it, as well."

The answer shows not only that a reward for the producer is needed, no matter if they are a fanfiction writer or a Minecraft player, but also shows the community itself socialises its members. Remembering to give a positive comment or giving kudos means more stories to read.

### **The Individual: Being a fanfiction writer**

"The systems model makes it possible to see that before a person can introduce a creative variation, he or she must have access to a domain and must want to learn to perform according to its rules." (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006/2013, p. 11)



Basically, the individuals writing fanfictions must have traits of the autotelic personality as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p.67). Autotelic implies that the person is able to motivate themselves by posing challenges to creatively enhance otherwise uninteresting tasks.

Amabile (1996, p. 120; 1998) has conducted several investigations, to find what makes a person creative. Like Csikszentmihalyi, she found several cognitive and motivational factors that have to be present to enhance creativity. One is the above-mentioned willingness to interact with both a domain and a field, learning the rules and getting to know the existing opinions of the people participating in the given field. Once having done that, 'breaking rules' and 'divergent thinking' are likewise surprisingly essential personality traits of creative people (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006/2013, p. 12). Again, in a fanfiction setting this makes sense, since the writer needs to know canon and have an intimate knowledge about and passionate relationship with the characters of the tent-pole, the original media event (Jensen & Vistisen, 2013), yet be able to make up new interesting and surprising plot- and storylines, as well as characterisations.

This inherent passion for a subject doubles when it comes to fanfiction. The writer must have a passion for the characters they want to write about. This part is about participating in fandom life, learning the canon, and interacting with other fans. The other passion is for writing, a skill; the writer wants and needs to learn to be able to create stories which will be read by the collective. Csikszentmihalyi (2006/2013, p. 12) points out that a creative individual needs to be able to convince others of their ideas and have a personality that makes it possible to be taken seriously by other participants. The needed access to the fandom field would mean profiles on different fanfiction sites and at least a tumblr account, as well as a network of contacts to enhance the creative potential, using the contacts and access to get more readers, inspiration, and information.

Intrinsic motivation is needed to be able to persevere during the writing and publishing process, as well as being able to absorb the relevant memes and knowledge (ibid, p. 13). While extrinsic motivation, like money and fame, can be positive, Amabile and Pillemer (2012, p. 4) show that it is the intrinsic motivation, finding the reward in the activity itself, which is the main part of writing. In fact, Amabile (1996, p. 120) shows that contracts, as well as surveillance

or even just the expectation of a critical evaluation, will have a negative impact on motivation and, with it, on creativity. Her research explains why so many fanfiction writers abandon their stories when they receive a negative comment or review. “Threatening critical evaluation connoting incompetence” (ibid) will have a negative impact on creativity, and a negative comment will be viewed as such an evaluation. This is equally important regarding the writer’s real life. Anonymity or pseudonymity is needed to ensure the safety of the fanfiction writer (Romano, 2014; Tang, 2014 on China’s detention of young fanfiction writers) and give them the peace of mind needed to fully explore their own fantasies and ideas without fearing repercussions (Busse & Hellekson, 2012, p. 38; boyd, 2012).

On the other hand, Amabile (1996, p. 120) shows how the social environment can enhance motivation and creativity. Giving the individual autonomy and a sense of control, as well as recognition, will have a positive effect. As shown above, restrictions and limitations in the form of censorship were the main reasons for writers choosing to leave FFnet and post on AO3 instead. Co-creating through beta-ing each other’s work, developing so-called plotbunnies, or even co-authoring a story are well-known events within fanfiction communities.

This shows that the organisations behind fanfiction sites should be aware of the needs and wants of the individuals who generate the content, as well as the needs and wants of the group. These organisations need to be able to continue as a dynamic environment for both readers and writers. Likewise, readers and commentators need to be aware of the problematic relationship between writer and commentator. A commentator cannot demand anything from a writer. The writer has published the story because they wanted to do so, not because they needed to. Any coercion or threatening behaviour will likely bring about the opposite of the intended: an abandoned story.

## Conclusion

“In order to want to introduce novelty into a domain, a person should first of all be dissatisfied with the status quo.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006/2013, p.15).

A typical definition of fanfiction explains the stories as ‘filling out plot-holes’ or ‘fixing’ the original tent-poles storyline. As shown

above, this does not cover all of the elements involved in the creation of fanfiction. The “status quo” can be seen as the shortcomings of the original media event, but fan communities also discuss gender, politics, and representation (or the lack thereof), just to name a few topics not covered here and which are important if one seeks to

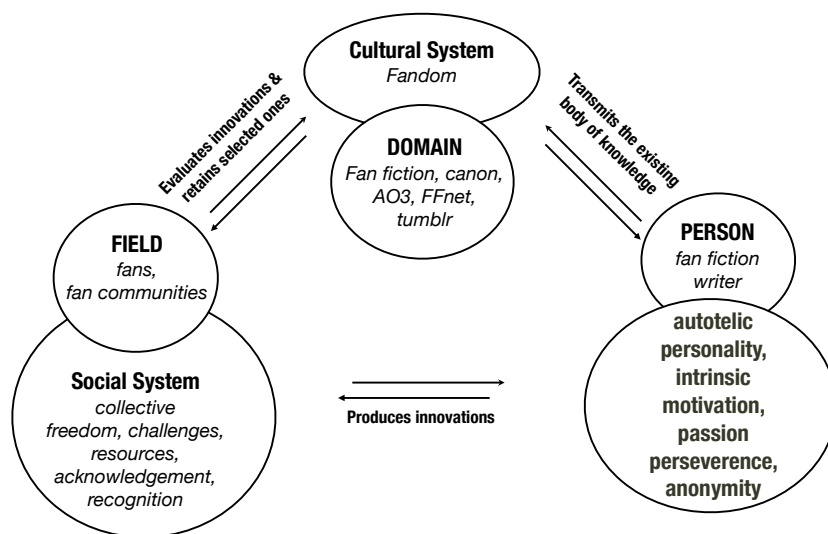


Figure 2: The modified Systems Model.

understand the collective of fans and their quest to write fanfiction.

Still, we are now able to put a few extra concepts to the revised Systems Model by Csikszentmihalyi (See figure 2).

The dual passions of love for the characters and love of writing and telling stories is the very basis for the individual as well as the community, or rather collective, of fandom and fanfiction. While the OTW takes many of the needs and wants of the individual and the field into account in their design of AO3, other social media sites such as FFnet need to enable cooperation and collaboration, as well as linking to external sites and media, if they want to keep writers on their sites and support the development of a collective.

This is it, then? Case closed, creativity and fanfiction explained? Far from it. Many questions remain open, many more questions could be asked. Where does the initial passion come from? A need to write? Falling in love with the characters? And why is the popu-

lation of fanfiction sites mostly female? One of big questions, though, is, whether we even should do research into the realm of fanfiction. Is it really a good idea to turn the collective of a fanfiction site into a public place for academic scrutiny?

## References

- Amabile, T. M., 1996. *Creativity in Context*. Westview: Boulder, Colorado.
- Amabile, T. M., 1998. How to Kill Creativity. *Harvard Business Review*, September.
- Amabile, T. M. and J. Pillemer, 2012. Perspectives on the Social Psychology of Creativity. *Journal of Creative Behavior*, 46. 1
- AO3, 2012. *From FF.net to AO3 - some frequently asked questions*. [online] Available at: [http://archiveofourown.org/admin\\_posts/226](http://archiveofourown.org/admin_posts/226) [Accessed 14 August 2014].
- boyd, d., 2008. *A Response to Christine Hine*. [online] Available at: <http://www.danah.org/papers/EthnoBoundaries.pdf> [Accessed 14 August 2014].
- boyd, d., 2012. The Politics of 'Real Names': Power, Context, and Control in Networked Publics. *Communications of the ACM*, 55.8.
- boyd, d. and N. B. Ellison, 2008. Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13.
- Busse, K. and Karen Hellekson, 2012. Identity, Ethics, and Fan Privacy. Larsen, K., and Lynn Zubernis (eds.). *Fan Culture. Theory/Practice*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle upon Tyne.
- Coppa, F., 2006. A Brief History of Media Fandom. Hellekson, K., and Kristina Busse (eds.). *Fanfiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, McFarland: Jefferson.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., 1990. *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Harper Perennial: New York.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., 2006/2013. A Systems Perspective on Creativity in Henry, J. (ed.). *Creative Management and Development*, Sage: London, 3rd edition.
- Dawkins, R., 2006. *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Driscoll, C., 2006. The Romance of Pornography and the Pornography of Romance. Hellekson, K., and Kristina Busse (eds.). *Fanfiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, McFarland: Jefferson.

- Ellis, C., T. E. Adams and A. P. Bochner, 2011. Autoethnography: An Overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, Vol. 12, 1. [online] Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095> [Accessed 14 August 2014].
- Jensen, T., 2013. Designing for relationship: Fanfiction sites on the Internet. Nykänen, H., O. P. Riis and Jörg Zeller (eds.), *Theoretical and Applied Ethics*. Aalborg Universitetsforlag: Aalborg.
- Jensen, T. and P. Vistisen, 2013. Tent-Poles of the Bestseller. How Crossmedia Storytelling can spin off a Mainstream Bestseller. *academic quarter*, 7. [online] Available at: [http://www.akademiskkvarter.hum.aau.dk/pdf/vol7/16a\\_TjensenPVistisen\\_TenPoles.pdf](http://www.akademiskkvarter.hum.aau.dk/pdf/vol7/16a_TjensenPVistisen_TenPoles.pdf) [Accessed 14 August 2014].
- Thomas, D. and J. S. Brown, 2011. *A New Culture of Learning. Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Milestones, 2012. *AO3 Milestones*. [online] Available at: [http://archiveofourown.org/admin\\_posts/271](http://archiveofourown.org/admin_posts/271) [Accessed 14 August 2014].
- Minecraft*, [minecraft.net](http://minecraft.net) [Accessed 14 August 2014].
- Mitchell, W. J., 2000. Replacing Place. Lunenfeld, P. (ed.), *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media*. MIT Press: Cambridge.
- OTW, 2014. The Future of Fanworks Legal Q & A - Post 1. [online] Available at: <https://transformativeworks.org/zh-hans/node/2583> [Accessed 14 August 2014].
- Romano, A., 2014. *For young women in China, slash fanfiction is a dangerous hobby*. [online] Available at: <http://www.dailydot.com/geek/in-china-20-people-women-arrested-for-writing-slash/> [Accessed 14 August 2014].
- Sherlock*, 2010 - 2014. BBC television series.
- Sherlock Holmes*, 1984 - 1994. Granada television series.
- Supernatural*, 2005 - 2014. Warner Bros. television series.
- Tang, K., 2014. Inside China's Insane Witch Hunt for Slash Fiction Writers. [online] Available at: <http://www.buzzfeed.com/kevintang/inside-chinas-insane-witch-hunt-for-slash-fiction-writers> [Accessed 14 August 2014].