

**The author function in flux: Digital participation in transmedia and
the contested rise of fan-authorship in Harry Potter, *Game of
Thrones*, and the Witcher**

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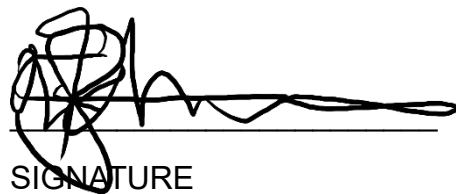
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THE AUTHOR FUNCTION IN FLUX: DIGITAL PARTICIPATION IN TRANSMEDIA AND THE CONTESTED RISE OF FAN-AUTHORSHIP IN HARRY POTTER, *GAME OF THRONES*, AND THE WITCHER

I declare that the above dissertation is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the destabilisation of traditional authorship in the context of digital participatory culture, focusing on how transmedia convergence has reshaped the interpretive and creative power dynamics between authors, texts, and audiences. Drawing upon Henry Jenkins's theories of participatory culture and "textual poaching" (1992; 2008; 2013), Pierre Lévy's model of collective intelligence (2019), and John Fiske's analyses of power and resistance in cultural production (1993), the study explores how networked audiences increasingly function as co-authors within transmedia ecosystems. Through comparative analyses of *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*, and *The Witcher*, the dissertation traces how fan interventions, ranging from online discourse and fanfiction to social media activism, challenge the singularity of authorial control and reshape canonical meaning. It specifically interrogates J.K. Rowling's contested commentary post the publication of the *Harry Potter* novels; the influence of fan theorising on HBO's *Game of Thrones* (notably "Cleganebowl"); and the collaborative world-building between Andrzej Sapkowski's novels, CD Projekt Red's games, and Netflix's adaptation of *The Witcher*. These case studies demonstrate that the author function, as defined by Foucault (1977, p. 113), can now be distributed across digital networks, wherein creators and audiences engage in continuous negotiation over narrative authority. By situating these interactions within the broader logics of convergence culture and networked media, this dissertation argues that digital participation has expanded reader response to the point where it has generated a new paradigm of *fan-authorship*, wherein collective intelligence and transmedia production converge to redefine both creative agency and cultural power in the twenty-first century.

KEY TERMS

Authorship; Author-function; Participatory culture; Collective intelligence; Digital fandom; Convergence culture; Adaptation studies; Transmedia storytelling; Fan activism; Interpretive authority; Platform capitalism; J.K. Rowling; *Harry Potter*; *Game of Thrones*; *The Witcher*

DEDICATION

For my father, Monty Goldman.

He loved me, guided me, and encouraged me to pursue a life in academia. He always hoped I would complete my MA and PhD, and he would have been deeply proud to see this day.

He was taken too soon, and I only wish he were here to witness this important step in my journey.

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Table of Contents

DECLARATION	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
TABLE OF FIGURES	vi
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING AUTHORSHIP IN AN AGE OF PARTICIPATION	1
CHAPTER 2 – UNFINISHED THRONES: INTERPRETIVE VACUUM AND PARTICIPATORY PRESSURE IN <i>GAME OF THRONES</i>	13
CHAPTER 3 – THE AUTHOR WHO REFUSED TO DIE: IDEOLOGICAL AUTHORITY AND PARTICIPATORY RESISTANCE IN THE HARRY POTTER FRANCHISE	52
CHAPTER 4 – MARKETS AND MULTIPLICITY: DIFFUSE AUTHORSHIP AND PARTICIPATORY STRUGGLE IN THE WITCHER FRANCHISE	87
CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION: REWRITING AUTHORITY IN AN AGE OF PARTICIPATION	128
REFERENCES	134

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The “Cleganebowl” Get Hyped Visual meme.	30
Figure 2: The “Cleganebowl” Fucking Confirmed Visual meme.	32
Figure 3: Winds of Winter mockup cover meme.	33
Figure 4: The fan-made “Cleganebowl” Winter is Here poster featured on Twitter/X.	37
Figure 5: Network map illustrating relationships between “Cleganebowl”-related fan sites.	40

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING AUTHORSHIP IN AN AGE OF PARTICIPATION

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the relationship between authors, texts, and readers is being redefined by the communication channels prevalent in the digital era, despite the extent and nature of these relationships differing significantly across various media and platforms. Regardless of this variance, however, one trait that seems consistent is that modes of audience participation that were once relatively marginal and intimate, such as fan interactions on letters pages in early comics and Victorian audience correspondence with serial authors and their editors, have taken on a much greater degree of both visibility and intensity through digital communication channels. This shift is, in important respects, more than just quantitative. Now, not only can audiences communicate more rapidly and on a greater scale than was previously possible, but they can also do so far more collaboratively, as a result of the all-encompassing and far-reaching nature of the communication channels introduced through digital platforms. The expectations that arise inside a system where fans' participation in meaning-making is public and visible even to non-fans, arguably reshape the narrative and paratextual decisions (understood here as the surrounding discourse, interviews, and framing materials that influence interpretation) made by authors and producers. It is this emergent dynamic of large, loosely coordinated communities capable of exerting pressure on creators with which my research is primarily concerned.

In this context, texts function not as closed narrative objects but as publicly circulating artefacts embedded within ongoing discursive negotiation. This publicness does not depend on the stable identifiability of participants, but on the visibility, circulation, and uptake of interpretive acts within networked environments. Fan contributions, even when produced under pseudonymous identities, enter into a shared discursive field where they can be encountered, amplified, contested, and reinterpreted by others, including creators and institutions. At the same time, authors and producers do not stand outside this field but operate within it as publicly visible figures embedded in overlapping and often competing publics. In this sense, figures such as J.K. Rowling, George R.R. Martin, or Andrzej Sapkowski function not only as originators of texts but as discursive actors whose authority is continually negotiated alongside that of their audiences.

This dynamic becomes particularly visible in three transmedia franchises (that is, narrative worlds extending across multiple media forms such as novels, television, games, and digital platforms) that form the core case studies of this dissertation: *Game of Thrones*, Harry Potter, and the Witcher¹. Each of these texts presents a distinct

¹ Throughout this dissertation, titles are italicised only when referring to discrete, formally bounded works. Thus, *Game of Thrones* denotes the HBO television series, distinct from Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. By contrast, Harry Potter and the Witcher are not italicised when used as shorthand for transmedia franchises rather than for specific novels. Although Sapkowski's works are sometimes collectively referred to as *The Witcher Saga* in Polish publication contexts, no formal English-language

configuration of authorial presence and audience intervention. By examining the unfinished adaptation of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, J.K. Rowling's continued paratextual engagement with the Harry Potter series, and the polycentric transmedia expansion of Andrzej Sapkowski's Witcher universe, this study traces how participatory cultures exert pressure under conditions of absence, over-presence, and dispersal.

As suggested previously, this digitally amplified negotiation of authorial authority is not without historical precedent. The protracted timeframe surrounding both the creation and publication of serialised fiction has always allowed for audiences to exert a degree of influence over authorship. Conan Doyle's abortive attempt to kill off Sherlock Holmes was met with protests and mass subscription cancellations; Eugene Sue incorporated events from readers' letters into his *Les Mystères de Paris*; and, since the 1960s, comic publishers have periodically employed majority fan sentiment to determine major narrative outcomes and shifts. Importantly, however, these earlier examples are localised, intermittent, and typically mediated by publishers and editors, rather than the audiences themselves. What distinguishes our contemporary context is that the multitude of often poorly coordinated and largely mediated interpretive practices once sequestered within small communities now exist in a communicative environment that Pierre Lévy describes, in an interview on the evolution of networked culture, as "a medium with the almost complete disappearance of the constraints of a physical space", where "memory is accessible from any point on earth" and where "everybody has the ability, at least theoretically, to add something to the common memory" (Lévy, Farley and Lollini, 2019, p. 6). In a setting characterised by "many to many" communication and "a full kind of ubiquitous memory" (Lévy, Farley and Lollini, 2019, p. 6), interpretive acts rapidly accumulate as publicly visible discourse, commentaries, videos, memes, and speculative frameworks. All of which is to say that, where audiences could previously debate meaning post-production, they now actively attempt to shape meaning during production, despite often facing friction from industrial gatekeepers, corporate intellectual property regimes, and publicly resistant authorial figures.

These developments expose a fundamental tension that structures contemporary media culture: creative authority is no longer exercised solely by authors or production teams, but is increasingly negotiated across communities whose interpretive practices are both far more visible and algorithmically amplified than would have been previously possible, as a result of modern digital communication technologies (Within this dissertation, "interpretive authority" is understood as the capacity to legitimise particular readings of a text within a given discursive community, whether through institutional power, authorial presence, or collective endorsement). While poststructuralist accounts of authorship and participatory culture scholarship each offer valuable insights into this shift, neither framework fully accounts for how authorial

series title is consistently employed; accordingly, the unitalicised form signals franchise-level reference rather than citation of a discrete text.

authority continues to operate and reassert itself within these highly visible, networked environments. As a result, there remains a lack of clarity regarding the mechanisms through which interpretive power is negotiated across transmedia systems.

This study therefore asks how networked audiences participate in and shape meaning-making within contemporary media franchises, such as *Game of Thrones*, Harry Potter, and the Witcher, and how creators, in turn, resist or incorporate these interpretive pressures. It further examines the conditions under which such audience interventions become materially or discursively legible – whether in adaptation decisions, paratextual framing, or broader public discourse – and what these interactions reveal about the evolving function of authorship in a digital participatory context. These questions form the conceptual point of departure for the theoretical framework that follows.

To clarify how these struggles over meaning and authority take shape, it is necessary to define a theoretical framework that spans poststructural accounts of authorship, participatory culture studies, political analyses of audience agency, and adaptation theory. It is my contention that this recent public intersection of author, text and reader matters because it signals a shift in how creative authority is negotiated and performed. I do not believe that this shift is adequately described by existing theoretical models that treat authorship as either sovereign or dead. Rather, I argue that it demands a conceptual framework that understands authorship as dispersed, contested, and increasingly embedded within participatory cultures. Roland Barthes' claim that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes, 1977, p. 148) sought to pass interpretative ownership from the author to the community of readers. His argument that the practice of allowing the author to be the sole arbiter of the meaning of a text is "to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes, 1977, p. 147) was not a rejection of the role of authors, but a call to recognise that textual meaning cannot be fully contained by the author's intent. Michel Foucault's related description of the author-function similarly emphasises that authorship is not a personal role but a principle of classification, a way of organising and regulating discourse (Foucault, 1979, p. 19). In this sense, authorship functions more like a role or label that helps shape how people understand and use a text, rather than something fixed or personal.

While both theorists' claims are similar, they differ from one another in implication. As previously established, Barthes asserts that the author cannot control the act of interpretation, but that the assignation of meaning rests with the reader. Foucault takes this one step further when he states that, "the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society" (1979, p. 19). In effect, Foucault is asserting that, through the creation of a body of work, the author's personal identity becomes largely irrelevant to the functioning of the author's name, with all that remains being a societal function that categorises texts, thus fulfilling a gate-keeping role that allows institutions and corporate structures, such as streaming platforms and publishers, to stabilise meanings by attaching them to

individual names, through the manipulation of bureaucratic processes such as IP management and franchise governance. This notion becomes materially complicated in the digital era when a living, publicly-facing author, such as J.K. Rowling can, on the one hand, be appealed to as an authority on the meaning of their works (for example, fans appealing to Rowling's post-hoc declaration of Dumbledore's homosexuality at Carnegie Hall (Sturgis, 2007) and declaring it was implicit in the Harry Potter novels all along), while on the other hand having that same authority challenged (such as queer fans questioning the implicit nature of Dumbledore's sexuality as (not) portrayed in the novels). This clearly illustrates how digital platforms allow communities based in cyber-space to destabilise the author-function through the online production and circulation of both competing and complementary interpretations, while conversely allowing for authorial absence or over-presence to affect the public perception of the author-function, destabilising it from the "top down".

These poststructuralist insights provide a strong conceptual foundation for understanding the contemporary negotiation of authorial authority evident in *Game of Thrones*, Harry Potter, and the Witcher, but they are not sufficient on their own to explain why this struggle has become so publicly visible nor why particular fan communities have become highly invested in contesting or co-authoring the texts they consume. This is where Henry Jenkins' account of fan activity, first articulated in *Textual Poachers* (1992), becomes pivotal. In that work, Jenkins characterises fans as readers who "appropriate and remix content from popular mass culture" and whose interpretive and creative practices reaffirm their agency as "exceptional readings" rather than passive consumption (Jenkins, 1992, p. 290). Jenkins then argues that fans are distinguished by their heightened attention, the interpretive norms often applied by their communities, and their capacity to generate cultural artefacts that expand or reconfigure existing narrative worlds. Such practices are observable across all three of the franchises examined in this dissertation: from the predictive theory-building communities surrounding *Game of Thrones*, to the transformative queer reworkings of Harry Potter, and the expansive modding (player-driven modification of game content, mechanics, or narrative elements) cultures that developed around the Witcher video games. While these practices were already visible in the late twentieth century, they have become increasingly prominent as media systems have converged in the digital space.

In *Convergence Culture* (2006), Jenkins develops this argument further by noting that contemporary media flow across multiple platforms, each demanding and rewarding different forms of audience engagement. Jenkins asserts that convergence is more than technological integration, being "a cultural logic" in which "the circulation of media content... depends heavily on consumers' active participation" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). This alteration in the flow of media places readers in a structurally novel position: their previously publicly invisible interpretive labour now becomes part of the very public paratextual ecology in which texts are produced, marketed, and evaluated. The spreadability framework presented in *Spreadable Media* (Jenkins, Ford and Green,

2013) further emphasises that media circulate more because audiences choose to pass them along, embedding meaning within social networks in the process, rather than the media simply being pushed outward or promoted by the producers, as will be demonstrated in my examination of the *Game of Thrones* predictive fandom, the contested paratextual discourse surrounding Harry Potter, and the transmedia expansions of the Witcher. The authors argue that the value of content lies specifically in its capacity to be circulated and repurposed through processes they place in the hands of audiences who function as “grassroots intermediaries” in a networked culture (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, pp. 7-8).

If Barthes and Foucault destabilise the author as the sovereign origin of meaning and Jenkins explains how audiences come to inhabit participatory roles, John Fiske clarifies why this shift carries political consequence. In *Understanding Popular Culture*, Fiske insists that “all popular culture is a process of struggle, of struggle over the meanings of social experience, of one’s personhood and its relations to the social order and of the texts and commodities of that order” (Fiske, 1989, p. 28). Popular culture is therefore not a passive sphere of consumption but “a productive process”, in which theoretical focus moves “from representation to semiotic activity... to reading practices” (Fiske, 1989, p. 142). This struggle unfolds within the culture of everyday life, which Fiske describes through “metaphors of struggle or antagonism”, where “hegemony [is] met by resistance” and “top-down power [is] opposed by bottom-up power” (Fiske, 1989, p. 47).

Crucially, this semiotic activity is not confined to symbolic play. In *Power Plays, Power Works*, Fiske demonstrates how dominant institutions attempt to “make their semiotic power material” through alliances between discourse and state authority (Fiske, 1993, p. 30), as social spaces become “controlled physically... and discursively” (Fiske, 1993, p. 137). Cultural production, under such conditions, becomes “simultaneously defensive, productive and reclamatory” (Fiske, 1993, p. 298).

Read through this lens, the predictive communities surrounding *Game of Thrones*, the queer and trans reworkings of Harry Potter, and the modding and adaptation debates surrounding the Witcher are not simply enthusiastic fan practices; they are instances of what Fiske would recognise as semiotic struggle conducted within unequal power relations. Meaning-making here is inseparable from institutional constraint, industrial authorship, and the negotiation of cultural authority. It is precisely this collision between grassroots productivity and industrial control that creates the conditions for the emergence of the hybrid figure that Anastasia Salter and Mel Stanfill describe as the “fan auteur”.

In our contemporary digital landscape, the frameworks of dispersed authorship, participatory culture, and semiotic struggle intersect with what Salter and Stanfill identify as the emergence of the “fan auteur”, a figure who inhabits an unstable position between creator and fan. In *A Portrait of the Auteur as Fanboy* (2020), they describe this figure as an individual who “leverages affective identification with fandom while

exerting industrial authority” (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, p. 12). Under such conditions, authorship becomes a performance that requires creators to demonstrate both authenticity to fans and legitimacy within industrial structures. This dynamic is visible across the case studies examined here: in the contested authorial absence surrounding *Game of Thrones*, in J.K. Rowling’s paratextual self-positioning within the Harry Potter franchise, and in the industrial negotiations that frame Andrzej Sapkowski’s relationship to the transmedia expansions of the *Witcher*. In each instance, creators operate within a field structured by participatory expectation and institutional power, compelled to navigate the tension between grassroots interpretive communities and corporate media infrastructures.

This dual role creates a new kind of authorship that is simultaneously personal, institutional, emotive, and economic. By embodying all these traits, the successful fan auteur straddles the divide between fan communities and multimedia corporations, effectively bridging the gap, thus providing a significant incentive for creators to attempt to position themselves as fans, even if this is later contested. This illuminates why conflicts between contemporary authors and fans – whether in the disputes surrounding J.K. Rowling’s public statements, the contested authorial absence of George R.R. Martin, or the industrial repositioning of Andrzej Sapkowski in relation to CD Projekt Red (CDPR) and Netflix – become so deeply charged: they are battles over who is perceived to have the right to legitimately speak for a text when interpretive authority is distributed across multiple communities.

The effects of these tensions are particularly visible in fan communities and community-adjacent spaces where the interpretive labour often focuses on issues of representation and the portrayal of marginalised identities. Jennifer Duggan’s work on queer and trans reader response to Harry Potter emphasises that the readers occupying these spaces pour a great deal of energy into creating works which articulate identities and narratives that, in many cases, the original texts may underrepresent or erase. Duggan demonstrates how trans and queer readers mobilise fan fiction (that is, fan-authored narrative works that extend, revise, or reimagine existing fictional worlds) and other transformative practices as modes of critical engagement, through which dominant interpretations are challenged, meanings are reworked, and alternative identities and narrative possibilities are made legible beyond the limits imposed by authorial authority (Duggan, 2021, pp. 155-157; 160). In this instance, reader interpretation is inseparable from lived experience, thus raising the stakes for the fans, as the act of meaning-making becomes personal as well as political. This entanglement foregrounds the emotive dimensions of participatory culture and underscores why conflicts over authorial intention cannot be reduced to textual disagreements: they become disputes over representation, recognition, and community belonging. In Chapter 2, this dynamic will be examined through the collective predictive and corrective discourse of *Game of Thrones* fandom; in Chapter 3, through the queer and trans re-readings of Harry Potter; and in Chapter 4, through the contested representational politics of the *Witcher*’s transmedia adaptations.

This project therefore proceeds from three interlocking theoretical positions. First, following Barthes' assertion that "the Author is dead", interpretive authority is understood as displaced from origin to readership, such that meaning emerges through reception rather than authorial intent (Barthes, 1977, pp. 147-148). Second, drawing on Foucault's account of the author-function, authorship is treated not as a personal essence but as a classificatory mechanism that regulates discourse, stabilises meaning, and facilitates institutional control (Foucault, 1979, p. 19). Third, these poststructural insights are situated within a media environment defined by participatory culture, spreadability, and collective intelligence, in which audiences do not merely interpret texts but actively circulate, contest, and transform them through networked practices (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 2-3; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, pp. 7-8; Lévy, Farley and Lollini, 2019, p. 6). Throughout this chapter, these frameworks are operationalised to examine how contemporary fan communities negotiate, resist, and reconfigure creative authority in *Game of Thrones*, *Harry Potter*, and *the Witcher*, each of which presents a distinct configuration of participatory pressure and authorial response.

The extent to which audience practices shape textual production becomes even more pronounced when considered through the lens of generic adaptation. While this study draws selectively on adaptation theory, it does not treat adaptation as a primary explanatory framework. Rather, adaptation is employed in a limited diagnostic capacity, primarily to demonstrate the insufficiency of medium-specific or fidelity-based explanations for developments that emerge more clearly from participatory interpretive pressure within digitally networked fan communities. Linda Hutcheon notes that "telling" and "showing" modes provide different opportunities and obstacles, and that adaptation inevitably involves a process of re-creation that is conditioned by medium (Hutcheon, 2013, pp. 26-27). In addition, Hutcheon observes that the possible response of the target audience to a story is always going to be a concern for the adapters (2013, pp. 110-111), leaving adaptations particularly vulnerable to the sort of participatory interpretive pressures I examine. Furthermore, the shift from novel to film, or from game to television series, demands changes that extend far beyond considerations of fidelity or infidelity; they are transformations that, in many cases, are rooted in the inherently different modes of communication employed by different types of media. Robert Stam's critique of the discourse surrounding fidelity similarly emphasises that adaptations are "readings" of texts, as opposed to copies, and that they exist within a "dialogic" network of intertexts (Stam, 2000, p. 54).

When adaptations are released to highly participatory communities, as is increasingly becoming the case, this dialogic process becomes entangled with fan commentary and corporate concerns, such as economic viability and algorithmic visibility. Naturally, all these factors exert pressure on how narratives are reshaped for consumption through new platforms. These pressures become especially visible in the adaptive trajectories of *Game of Thrones*, where HBO's televisual choices increasingly diverge from an unfinished literary source, and in *the Witcher*, where successive adaptations

across novels, games, and streaming television generate competing interpretive centres. Although the Harry Potter franchise likewise encompasses significant adaptive movement across novels, films, and games, its central tensions in this study arise less from medium-shift divergence than from Rowling's sustained paratextual interventions and ideological reassertions. In both *Game of Thrones* and the *Witcher*, adaptation unfolds within highly participatory environments in which fan expectations and industrial considerations intersect, complicating any straightforward notion of authorial control.

All told, these theoretical frameworks offer a means to conceptualise the altered dynamics of contemporary online authorship. Digital platforms enable the creation of community spaces comprising large enough memberships to constitute what Lévy has described as a "collective intelligence", which operates through the ongoing dissemination and transformation of shared memories. These informal networks then become spaces where every act of liking, sharing, commenting, subscribing, or retweeting "transforms the relationship between data" (Lévy, Farley and Lollini, 2019, p. 7). These communities do not act as unified entities, pursuing singular agendas; instead, they form fluctuating, overlapping networks in which interpretive labour circulates, gains traction, spreads, and slowly exerts growing pressure on authors. Within this environment, creators must navigate an ever-changing landscape where increasingly public and coordinated fan practices, and audiences who regard themselves as stakeholders in narrative direction frequently challenge their interpretive authority. Authorship, therefore, becomes a dynamic and contested process defined by the constant interplay between creators and audiences, resulting in this contested landscape manifesting differently across distinct media ecologies – as becomes evident when comparing prestige television adaptation (*Game of Thrones*), franchise paratextuality (Harry Potter), and dispersed transmedia production (the *Witcher*). Because such differences shape how interpretive authority is negotiated or resisted, comparative analysis becomes essential to tracing the full implications of these contemporary audience-author dynamics.

Against this theoretical backdrop, my dissertation examines three specific configurations of creator-audience engagement: the *Game of Thrones* television series and its reciprocal relationship with *A Song of Ice and Fire* fans, the Harry Potter franchise and its digital paratexts, and the evolution of the *Witcher* transmedia franchise, which spans the original novels, the sequel games, and the Netflix streaming adaptation. I do not offer a comprehensive model of digital-era authorship but instead analyse three major global franchises whose digitally saturated fan cultures make them especially productive sites of inquiry. These three cases have been selected for more than their popularity, as they illustrate contrasting configurations of authorship, adaptation, and audience participation: a prestige television adaptation that overtakes and diverges from its literary source; a single, highly visible author whose persona has become inseparable from her work; and a transmedia franchise negotiated across novels, games, and streaming television.

Thus, each case illustrates a different facet of the contemporary author-reader dynamic and reveals the various mechanisms through which audiences attempt to influence narrative production, to varying degrees of success.

A detailed analysis of these cases allows me to examine the extent and manner in which authors, showrunners and producers negotiate, resist, or embrace such participatory pressures, and what happens to textual authority, creative decision-making, and the cultural status of the works when they do so. Importantly, these cases demonstrate that such influence is far from uniform. It may manifest as organised pressure via social media campaigns and petitions, as speculative and interpretive practices that collaboratively map possible narrative futures, or as transformative works that reframe, extend, or directly contest the source texts. What unites these examples is not the presence of influence itself, but the communicative conditions created by our largely digital environment that render such influence possible. Therefore, this study asks how advances in digital communication technologies, such as the growth and near-ubiquity of social media platforms and algorithmic audience selection, reshape the conditions under which audiences can intervene in, or shape, creative decision-making in these franchises. In this study, I am concerned not only with the forms such audience interventions take, but with the conditions under which they become legible in production and adaptation decisions, in paratextual framing, and in the subsequent reception and valuation of these works and their creators.

Methodologically, my dissertation employs comparative textual analysis, digital discourse analysis (a qualitative tracing of patterns in publicly visible online fan interpretation), and paratextual examination (analysis of creator statements, promotional materials, and surrounding discourse that frame reception) to track the circulation and contestation of meaning across adaptive and digital environments. The comparative approach allows for evaluation of narrative changes across adaptations and sequels whose shifts in structure or theme can be read as adaptive negotiations with the interpretive pressures exerted by fan communities. Digital discourse analysis enables the mapping of trends in popular meaning-making across platforms such as Reddit, Tumblr, YouTube, and Twitter/X, where networked participation allows interpretive activity to circulate and gain visibility. The examination of paratextual framing, such as interviews, show-runner statements, social media posts and fan-fiction (where these works function less as independent narratives and more as paratextual signals of interpretive pressure), supports the conceptual mapping of fan and creator authorship as sites for the contestation of creative authority. The aim is not to catalogue every instance of audience response, as might be accomplished through audience ethnography or large-scale quantitative analysis (which would produce different forms of knowledge), but to trace discernible patterns of influence in which audience commentary intersects with production decisions. These methods highlight the communicative conditions that illustrate the ways contemporary audiences position themselves actively in relation to texts and how creators respond, whether by embracing, resisting, or strategically engaging with fan expectations.

These methods are, therefore, oriented toward tracing patterns of visibility and influence within publicly accessible discourse, rather than establishing comprehensive empirical coverage of fan activity.

In selecting specific instances of fan and creator discourse for analysis, this study does not seek statistical representativeness, but instead prioritises circulation and prominence, particularly where these are shaped by algorithmically mediated visibility within networked media environments. The examples examined throughout this dissertation are, therefore, drawn from paratexts and discussions that have attained a degree of recognisability within digital fan cultures, as evidenced by their persistence across platforms and the extent to which they recur within community discourse, as well as by their accessibility through standard search practices. In this respect, the selection process deliberately reflects the experience of a typical user navigating contemporary digital environments, where search engines and platform algorithms mediate access to information and amplify particular interpretations over others. Phenomena such as the “Cleganebowl” theory are thus approached not as isolated or anomalous cases, but as highly visible nodes within broader networks of participatory meaning-making, whose prominence signals their capacity to shape discourse and exert interpretive pressure. This approach foregrounds the role of algorithmically mediated visibility as a structuring condition of contemporary participatory culture, while acknowledging that such visibility is uneven, contingent, and shaped by the logics of platform circulation rather than by any neutral metric of representativeness.

Given that this study engages with publicly accessible digital discourse, the material analysed throughout is drawn from platforms and sources that are already in the public domain. The focus of analysis is not on individual users as subjects, but on broader patterns of circulation, interpretation, and discursive prominence within fan communities. Where individuals are referenced, these are either public figures operating within the media industries under discussion or participants identified solely through publicly visible online handles, without any attempt to establish identities beyond what is already disclosed within those contexts. As such, this study does not involve direct interaction with participants, nor does it seek to produce generalisable claims about specific user groups. Instead, it approaches digital discourse as a paratextual field in which meanings are produced, contested, and amplified, ensuring that the analysis remains focused on cultural dynamics rather than personal attribution.

The dynamics outlined above become visible in distinct ways across the three case studies that follow and form the base of each of the chapters that follow. The first case examined in Chapter 2 employs close intertextual reading between key moments in *A Song of Ice and Fire* and HBO’s *Game of Thrones*, using Hutcheon and Stam’s theories to show how shifts in Sandor “the Hound” Clegane’s character arc become legible within the context of intensive fan theorisation. Digital discourse analysis and paratextual examination then trace the production and proliferation of these theories, drawing on Jenkins’ concepts of textual poaching and spreadable media to illuminate

how audience speculation may have influenced the HBO showrunners. As my earlier theoretical framework suggests, this case demonstrates how adaptive practice intersects with participatory meaning-making in a highly visible media environment.

In the third chapter, the second case examines Rowling as a figure whose digital interventions provoke strong interpretive resistance, revealing how authorial attempts to regulate meaning are contested within networked communities. Digital discourse analysis and paratextual reading identify key sites of authorial contestation in the adversarial relationship between Rowling, her loyal fanbase, and the queer and marginalised readers who challenge her conservative ideological statements and subsequent paratextual reframing of the Harry Potter franchise. These points of conflict are illustrated through Jenkins' theories of textual poaching and spreadability and Lévy's model of collective intelligence, and further evaluated through Fiske, Duggan, and Salter and Stanfill, highlighting the destabilisation of the author-function outlined previously.

The third case, in the fourth chapter, turns to the *Witcher*, where the proliferation of adaptations across different media reveals how commercial and fan-driven imperatives collide, especially when an effectively absentee author allows his creative primacy to become diluted and dispersed across studios, showrunners, and fan communities. Comparative analysis highlights thematic and structural alterations across the franchise, while digital discourse analysis and paratextual examination track the interpretive and ideological conflicts among fan communities, Andrzej Sapkowski, CDPR, and Lauren Hissrich. Drawing on the full theoretical framework established earlier, this case maps the interpretive instability of a franchise whose narrative and thematic cohesion has fragmented under conditions of dispersed authorship.

Each case traces not only the tensions that arise within these contexts but also the broader implications for how authorship functions in a digital environment characterised by participatory engagement and algorithmic amplification. Taken together, these cases enable a broader examination of how authorship operates in an environment where meaning-making is decentralised, collaborative, and publicly contested. Across different media forms, each case captures a distinct iteration of the same cultural shift: the dispersal of creative authority across creators, industries, and audiences. By examining these tensions comparatively, this dissertation traces the emerging structures through which contemporary audiences attempt to influence narrative production and through which authors and studios negotiate or resist such pressures.

Having established the conceptual and methodological coordinates of this study, my discussion now turns to *Game of Thrones*, a case in which the pressures of participatory culture become unusually visible through the residual interpretive marks that persist well after the discussion of the adaptation's controversies has faded. *Game of Thrones* provides a crucial early illustration of how interpretive activity, initially

unintentional and once peripheral to production, began to circulate and replicate with sufficient force to potentially shape the terms on which adaptation proceeded. In beginning here, my dissertation traces how an audience prone to intense degrees of theorisation and an unfinished literary source created the conditions under which questions of authorship, authority, and readerly intervention could no longer remain abstract.

CHAPTER 2 – UNFINISHED THRONES: INTERPRETIVE VACUUM AND PARTICIPATORY PRESSURE IN *GAME OF THRONES*

As outlined in my theoretical framework, the adaptive instability that emerges when a text moves across media (Hutcheon, 2013, pp. 26-27; Stam, 2000, pp. 54, 64), combined with the participatory interpretive practices characteristic of digital fan cultures (Jenkins, 1992, p. 290), creates fertile conditions for audience speculation to circulate, gain traction, and potentially exert pressure on creative decision-making. In addition, the visibility and cumulative effects of such speculation within what Lévy describes as a collective intelligence underscore how interpretive labour becomes publicly legible during the production process rather than only in retrospective reception (Lévy, Farley and Lollini, 2019, pp. 6-7). This chapter draws on these theoretical premises by tracing how they materialise within the specific conditions of *A Song of Ice and Fire*'s unfinished narrative and the HBO adaptation's accelerated production environment, enabling the *Game of Thrones* fan community to be positioned to anticipate and potentially redirect the show's narrative trajectory.

In the case of the adaptation of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels into the multi-award-winning HBO television series, *Game of Thrones*, my argument is illustrated through the inclusion of a single, pivotal, event in the final season of the HBO series. This event is colloquially referred to as "Cleganebowl", a fan-coined portmanteau that invokes the logic of mass-mediated sporting spectacle, echoing the "Super Bowl", and thereby framing the anticipated confrontation between Sandor "the Hound" Clegane and his older brother, Gregor "the Mountain" Clegane, less as organic narrative culmination than as a competitive entertainment event. I intend to establish a strong correlative connection between online fan theorising about "Cleganebowl" on Reddit, Twitter/X, and YouTube, and the inclusion of the event in Season 8 of the HBO series.

In this instance, the adaptation of the novels is of specific interest, insofar as Martin had not concluded his novels by the time David Benioff and Daniel Weiss, the showrunners of *Game of Thrones*, began developing the script for the eighth season. This presents a relatively unique circumstance, as neither the fans of the novels and the television series, nor the various script writers knew precisely how the narrative was to conclude. While Benioff and Weiss had previously sat down with Martin to be coached on the broad strokes of how *A Song of Ice and Fire* might end, they did not have the time to be briefed on all the small details – which Martin himself arguably did not know at that stage – and, as Martin himself admitted, "[...] the devil is in the details" (Windolf, 2014). This lack of relative clarity regarding the conclusion of the novels being adapted, combined with the showrunners' insistence that the HBO series be restricted to eight seasons and the subsequent tight production schedule, created an environment where Benioff and Weiss, along with their co-writers, found themselves in a position where they were effectively creating their own narrative, to a point, rather than adapting the original source material.

This proved to be the perfect breeding ground for a multitude of fan theories, as Martin's last novel, *A Dance with Dragons*, was published on the 12th of July 2011, just one month after Season 1 of the HBO television series had finished airing. The first traceable "Cleganebowl" theory was posted on A Forum of Ice and Fire, a website dedicated to the novels, on the 11th of January 2012. This theory was based on evidence presented in *A Feast for Crows*, along with speculation surrounding prophecies presented in earlier novels, that fans interpreted to mean that the Hound had survived the seemingly fatal injuries he had sustained in *A Storm of Swords*. The combination of circumstantial evidence pointing to the Hound's survival, cryptic prophecies that could indicate that the Hound had a great destiny, and the childhood trauma suffered at the hands of his brother led many fans to believe that the only suitable conclusion to the Hound's character arc would be to for him to face and defeat the Mountain in combat. This would quell the Hound's hatred for his brother and provide a satisfyingly climactic end to his thirst for vengeance.

I, however, contend that the narrative presented in Martin's novels published to date does not support the inclusion of "Cleganebowl" in the final season of the HBO series, as it is not thematically well-supported, while also not being sustained through the development of Sandor Clegane's character arc throughout the novels. In fact, I further contend that the inclusion of this event is not even supported by the development of Sandor Clegane's character arc in the first six seasons of the HBO series. If it is the case that the inclusion of "Cleganebowl" is not supported by the development of Sandor Clegane's character arc in Martin's novels or the early seasons of the HBO series, I am left with the question of why the showrunners and scriptwriters chose to include the event in Season 8. As will be discussed later on in this chapter, my answer to this question is that the showrunners most likely became aware of the popularity of this fan theory through its permeation across multiple digital social media platforms and its relative ubiquity online. Seeing the fans clamouring for this showdown between the brothers Clegane, Benioff and Weiss chose to include it in Season 8 of the HBO series, somewhat to the detriment of Sandor's character arc and the overall narrative.

In order to ascertain if the inclusion of the violent confrontation between the brothers Sandor and Gregor Clegane in the HBO series was potentially a result of fan pressure, it is necessary to conduct a close critical analysis of Sandor Clegane's character arc across the *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels and the *Game of Thrones* HBO series. Obviously, it would be impractical to summarise the extent of every scene in which the Hound appears across both media, so this analysis will focus on key moments intended to establish the start of the Hound's arc, its development, and its conclusion.

This comparative analysis is not intended to provide a comprehensive account of adaptation as a medium-specific process. Questions of televisual convention, narrative compression, character distribution, and the practical demands of serial television are undoubtedly relevant to adaptation studies, but they fall outside the central scope of this chapter. My purpose is narrower: to establish whether the HBO

series broadly preserves the direction of Sandor Clegane's character arc prior to its eventual divergence from the novels. Adaptation theory is therefore used here in a limited diagnostic capacity: it helps distinguish ordinary adaptive transformation from a later narrative deviation that is not adequately explained by medium-specific alteration alone.

Hutcheon (2013, p. 40) contends:

In the move from telling to showing, a performance adaptation must dramatize: description, narration, and represented thoughts must be transcoded into speech, actions, sounds, and visual images. Conflicts and ideological differences between characters must be made visible and audible. In the process of dramatization there is inevitably a certain amount of re-accentuation and refocusing of themes, characters, and plot.

I recognise that this is a largely inescapable fact of the process of adaptation, thus my intertextual analysis will highlight instances where changes have been made to the source material resulting in a more compressed and externally legible form within the series. However, I argue that the servicing of these needs still does not justify the inclusion of "Cleganebowl", as Sandor Clegane's character arc from the novels is largely preserved without its inclusion, despite the many changes that occur as a result of the adaptation.

Echoing Hutcheon's observations above, Stam (2000, p. 64) also argues that adaptations can be employed to interrogate the source material from which they are drawn, creating a conversation between the original work and its adaptation, which he refers to as an "intertextual dialogism". He states that "every text forms an intersection of textual surfaces. All texts are tissues of anonymous formulae, variations on those formulae, conscious and unconscious quotations, and confections and inversions of other texts". This, I contend, supports my observation of how fan theories and expectations influenced the adaptation process, making "Cleganebowl" a product of collective cultural creation rather than of strictly original authorial intent.

Before examining the patterns of fan theorisation circulating around the "Cleganebowl" incident, it is necessary to establish whether the character arc constructed for Sandor Clegane across Martin's novels and the early seasons of the HBO adaptation justifies the event's inclusion in Season 8. To do this, the following analysis focuses on how his character is defined by his shifting morals, abrupt character changes during key moments in adaptation, and a narrative that deliberately avoids closure. This then illustrates that "Cleganebowl" is not thematically necessary, despite it having been heavily theorised and lobbied for by digital networks of active participatory fan communities

In the novel, *A Game of Thrones*, Sandor is introduced as Prince Joffrey Baratheon's enforcer, an instrument of sanctioned violence, who is defined by his callous efficiency. His early appearances portray him as a relatively one-dimensional character, whose cruelty is treated as functional rather than abnormal, and for whom any sign of moral reflection is conspicuously absent. Sandor's casual response to Bran Stark's suffering, in addition to his offer to kill Bran's direwolf, Summer, for Joffrey, illustrates a disposition towards violence that is untroubled by empathy or hesitation (Martin, 2011, pp. 87-88). This impression is reinforced by his killing of Mycah, as the act is carried out with disproportionate force and followed by a flippantly heartless remark. This consolidates Sandor's role as a shallow and merciless enforcer, rather than a character whose actions invite immediate scrutiny of his psychological makeup. At this stage of the novel, Sandor's acceptance of being called a "dog" by Joffrey seems to indicate that he is willing to tolerate dehumanisation at the hands of his liege: he offers no resistance to the insult, nor does he seem to reflect upon it. This presents a baseline identity for the character shaped by cold utility, seemingly mindless obedience, and the normalisation of brutality, rather than being shaped by any sort of articulated ethical code (Martin, 2011, p. 154).

This initial portrayal of Sandor as a cold and unfeeling enforcer is subtly destabilised over the course of the novel through his interactions with Sansa Stark. This is especially apparent when his contempt for knighthood is revealed to be rooted in personal trauma rather than straightforward cynicism. In an unguarded moment, Sandor recounts the childhood incident in which his brother Gregor burned his face over a toy knight to Sansa, briefly displaying vulnerability without asking for absolution or seeking her sympathy. This revelation does not excuse his past violence in any way, but it does serve to provide an explanation for its origin. Furthermore, this confession is notable because it betrays the novel's prior portrayal of his character, subverting the reader's reasonable expectations. In this way, the scene operates as a convincing narrative surprise that deepens Sandor's character while preserving his moral ambiguity. His rejection of chivalric ideals is shown to be rooted in an intimate encounter with their hollowness, as opposed to being purely performative or reactionary (Martin, 2011, pp. 285-287).

The novel further develops Sandor's psychological complexity through his intermittent acts of seeming kindness towards Sansa, which introduce important and superficially uncharacteristic moments of mercy without resolving into a coherent moral transformation. His interventions in response to Joffrey's escalating cruelty towards Sansa, by advising Sansa to comply in private and later shielding her from further harm on the battlements, clearly do not represent a sudden embrace of the chivalric ideals he openly rejects. Instead, they reinforce the paradox at the centre of his character, as Sandor clearly resists gratuitous cruelty while remaining deeply sceptical of the moral frameworks that claim to oppose it. These gestures of protection operate without any grounding in an articulated ethical system, seeming to emerge naturally based on the situation, as opposed to being rooted in any sort of ideology. At this stage

of the narrative, Sandor's capacity for gentleness clearly complicates brutality without justifying or redeeming it, leaving his moral code deliberately unstable and resistant to easy categorisation (Martin, 2011, pp. 687-694).

The HBO adaptation presents a more compressed and externalised version of Sandor's moral ambiguity, most notably in his brief protection of Sansa during the final episode of the first season. For the purposes of this study, the precise causes of this compression – whether related to medium, pacing, ensemble character distribution, or conventions of television writing – are less significant than the fact that the series still broadly preserves the direction of Sandor's early arc. His capacity for gentleness remains visible, but it is rendered through fewer, more immediately legible moments. In this sense, Season 1 preserves the recognisable outline of Sandor's character while reducing the slow accumulation of contradiction that gives his ethical position greater instability in Martin's text.

In *A Clash of Kings*, Sandor's previously implicit moral ambiguity is explicitly illustrated by his night-time encounter with Sansa in the Red Keep's godswood. When she questions him about his subservience in the face of being called a "dog", as opposed to his aggressive rejection of the title of knight, Sandor clarifies his ethical stance by stating, "I like dogs better than knights. [...] A hound will die for you, but never lie to you. And he'll look you straight in the face" (Martin, 1999, pp. 250-252). This scene reframes his earlier acceptance of dehumanisation from self-loathing to a form of twisted pride, grounded in brutal honesty rather than ideological commitment. Sandor's disdain for knighthood is thus revealed to be a rejection of the hypocrisy and performativity he associates with chivalry. This illustrates that Sandor has adopted a deliberately anti-idealistic code that values truthfulness and loyalty, while simultaneously rejecting the language of honour that legitimises feudal violence.

Sandor's explicit rejection of chivalric ideals is followed by a series of actions that test his stated moral position. When Joffrey orders Sansa stripped and beaten, Sandor's attempt to intervene, culminating in his act of covering her with his cloak, can now be understood to represent a refusal to participate in an act of excessive cruelty (Martin, 1999, pp. 418-420). This pattern continues during the riot in King's Landing, where Sandor rescues Sansa from the crowd and returns her safely to the Red Keep, despite having no formal obligation to do so. It is crucial to recognise that this intervention cannot be explained by duty to a liege, or out of a desire for personal advancement; Sandor exposes himself to significant risk without any significant expectation of reward or recognition. His rescue of Sansa thus functions as an ethical choice made again in the absence of ideology, reinforcing the central paradox of his character: he rejects the superficially romantic image of knighthood, but will act in a typically romanticised heroic manner on his own terms. In this sense, Sandor's loyalty is not dependent on the feudal code of chivalry, but situational, relational, and deeply resistant to codification within the structures that govern Westerosi violence (Martin, 1999, pp. 507-510).

Sandor's desertion during the Battle of the Blackwater marks his first decisive break from the social and moral structures that have defined his life. While the fear of fire, rooted in his childhood trauma, causes him to reach a crisis point when he is confronted by the wildfire consuming the river, his desertion of his post cannot be explained away by simple panic or cowardice. The battle forces Sandor to confront all the forces he has long resisted, as he is exposed to senseless violence, the callous demand of blind obedience, a total disregard for the lives of loyal soldiers, and wanton destruction born out of calculated desperation. His refusal to return to the fighting, followed by his final visit to Sansa before leaving King's Landing, signals more than a retreat from danger; it is a rejection of the role he has been compelled to occupy. In this case, his desertion functions as a rejection of a system he has always regarded as meaningless and hypocritical, rather than a moment of weakness. This act effectively transforms Sandor from an instrument of feudal violence into a figure actively seeking to distance himself from the system that has both scarred and sustained him. In refusing to die for a king he does not believe in, Sandor acts decisively on the anti-idealistic code he has expressed throughout the novel, tracing a trajectory from indifferent enforcer to disillusioned dissenter (Martin, 1999, pp. 737-739).

As previously established in the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 1, adaptation frequently operates through omission and re-accentuation rather than direct replication. In the second season of *Game of Thrones*, Sandor's ethical development is reshaped by the removal of Sansa's secretive relationship with Ser Dontos, a subplot that in the novel subtly deepens Sansa's relationship with Sandor through shared intimacies and growing trust. In the absence of this gradual emotional buildup, the series allows a smaller number of highly charged scenes, most notably Joffrey's public humiliation of Sansa in "Garden of Bones" and Sandor's rescue of her during the riot in "Old Gods and New", to carry the burden of communicating their burgeoning relationship to the audience. These incidents operate on the level of spectacle, compensating for the altered narrative by highlighting Sandor's discomfort with cruelty and his willingness to protect Sansa in ways that are immediately clear to viewers. In taking this approach, however, the series once again limits the audience's ability to register the nuance in Sandor's character. This has the effect of replacing the unstable, situational moral code portrayed in the novel with more streamlined character snapshots that highlight his sympathy for Sansa.

Sandor's desertion during the Battle of the Blackwater in the second season of *Game of Thrones* roughly mirrors the events of the novel, paring Sandor's role down significantly in the process of adapting the material for the series. In this instance he is portrayed as protecting Joffrey, allowing the series to quickly and easily display Sandor's growing horror at the use of wildfire through a series of tight reaction shots. His later refusal to return to the fighting, punctuated by the blunt declaration "Fuck the king!", crystallises his disillusionment in a single dramatic gesture of open rebellion. While this compression may be partly attributable to the demands of serial television,

it also replaces the novel's gradual buildup of disillusionment with the feudal system with a sequence of high-intensity revelations. This makes Sandor's abrupt desertion easy for the audience to process but far less convincing, as it transforms a well-justified withdrawal from feudal violence into a narratively efficient turning point. The result further reflects the kind of adaptive re-accentuation outlined earlier in my dissertation, although this transformation alone does not account for the more substantial deviations that emerge later in the series.

In *A Storm of Swords*, Sandor's independence fails to provide him with the escape he seeks, as he finds himself repeatedly exposed to the traumas he has attempted to flee. His capture by the Brotherhood Without Banners and subsequent trial by combat against Beric Dondarrion force him into direct confrontation with the fear of fire that has shadowed him since childhood, now intensified by the events of the Blackwater. Although Sandor survives the duel, his victory does little more than confirm the persistence of his psychological wounds even in the absence of the system he despises. This highlights a critical flaw in Sandor's assumed character arc: escaping the social structures that shaped him does not immediately heal the psychic wounds they caused. This drives home that his continued survival does not guarantee any sort of redemption, thus reinforcing the sense that Sandor's past cannot be overcome through individual acts of endurance alone (Martin, 2000, pp. 373-378).

In capturing Arya Stark after her escape from the Brotherhood Without Banners, Sandor takes a significant step towards personal agency and responsibility. In choosing to ransom Arya to her brother Robb, for the first time Sandor acts in his own interest, as opposed to serving the interests of a liege or superior. Despite his methods remaining violent and coercive, the logic governing his actions has changed: Sandor is no longer functioning as an instrument of another's will, but as an agent navigating Westeros on his own terms. This marked shift in perspective is reinforced by his declaration that he intends to kill his brother, Gregor. Sandor finally expresses a desire for revenge, previously implicit in his attitude, as a personal vendetta. Taken together with his earlier renunciation of service to Joffrey, these incidents further highlight that his desertion at the Blackwater was more than a typical response to fear. They work to reinforce it as a rejection of the entire economy of honour and obedience that has structured his life. Sandor's emerging agency relocates his violence outside the legitimising frameworks of feudal power, completing his transition from reluctant enforcer to disillusioned free agent (Martin, 2000, pp. 478, 519, 542).

Sandor's journey with Arya comes to a climax at the Inn at the Crossroads, where the tension established between Sandor's tendencies towards violence and protection finally come to a head. After killing Polliver and being sufficiently badly wounded that quickly becomes incapable of continuing the journey, Sandor recognises his own vulnerability and confronts the limits of the path he has chosen. His request that Arya grant him the "gift of mercy" is not a plea for forgiveness nor is it an acknowledgement of guilt and request for justice, so much as it is a request for peace and escape from a meaningless and reviled existence. Arya's refusal and subsequent choice to leave

him alive but alone prevents readers from finding any closure in Sandor's arc, as the narrative also moves on from that point. The scene closes without any fundamental resolution, as Sandor is left without redemption or punishment, neither saved nor slain. Instead, he is left suspended between life and death, his fate determined not by chivalric justice or narrative reward but left entirely to chance. This open conclusion to his arc reinforces Martin's broader refusal to answer the moral questions asked in the novels, leaving Sandor's ethical position deliberately unstable at the point of his apparent demise (Martin, 2000, pp. 797-803).

Seasons 3 and 4 of *Game of Thrones*, continue to reshape Sandor's arc through adaptive decisions that prioritise narrative clarity and emotional accessibility over the drawn-out ambiguity of the novels. Events that unfold gradually across *A Storm of Swords*, namely Sandor's capture by the Brotherhood Without Banners, his trial by combat with Beric Dondarrion, his kidnapping of Arya, and the revelation of his intent to ransom her, are redistributed for pacing and are also made more dramatically explicit for the audience. The series provides clear insight into Sandor's motivations sooner than the novels, making his self-interest readily apparent to the audience and positioning his relationship with Arya as the primary emotional through-line of his development. This re-ordering of events hastens the audience's understanding of Sandor's new role as a free agent acting in his own best interests for the first time. While this sort of compression is discussed in Hutcheon's explanation of adaptation as "transcoding" narrative content into forms appropriate for episodic television, it also serves to blur the ethical instability that defines Sandor's novel arc (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 40). By presenting his motives directly and making his attachment to Arya explicit, the adaptation softens the ambiguity of his psychology, thus presenting Sandor in the mould of a violent protector whose character arc continues to fall into a much more predictable and reassuring trope-based pattern (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 40; Stam, 2000, p. 68).

The adaptation's reconfiguration of Sandor's arc, so that it concludes in a climactic duel with Brienne of Tarth in "The Children" provides the audience with a resolution that directly contrasts with the novels' denial of closure. In *A Storm of Swords*, Sandor's apparent death is quiet and morally unresolved, leaving readers free to question whether, in Sandor's case, withdrawal from violence constitutes redemption or exhaustion. By contrast, the adaptation transforms this meditative and banal ending into a spectacular confrontation that externalises Sandor's internal conflict through physical combat. The duel recontextualises Sandor's arc as he heroically sacrifices himself to protect Arya, thus eliminating much of his unresolved moral tension. This allows the series to translate psychological ambiguity into an accessible, visually satisfying endpoint. Hutcheon argues that adaptation often requires the dramatisation of psychological states, rendering them into "visible and audible" action, but in this case that transformation comes at a cost, as spectacle is substituted for ethical uncertainty (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 40). Read through Stam's account of the "transformational grammar" of adaptation, this shift illustrates how narrative ambiguity

may be reconfigured into determinate meaning in response to medium-specific and audience-oriented pressures, , although these factors do not fully account for the later structural divergence in Sandor's arc (Stam, 2000, p. 68). The result is not just an alternative ending, but a fundamentally different interpretation of Sandor's character that resolves what the novels leave deliberately ambiguous.

Martin's provision of a coda to Sandor's apparent demise in *A Feast for Crows* deliberately offers yet more ambiguous closure to his arc that remains consistent with his long resistance to ideological redemption. Through Brienne of Tarth's encounter with the Elder Brother on the Quiet Isle, the text provides readers with a symbolic death rather than a confirmed one, which sustains the ambiguity surrounding Sandor's end. The Elder Brother declares "the Hound" dead, even though evidence of Sandor's demise is conspicuously absent. The setting itself heightens the ambiguity of the epilogue, characterised by silence, penance, and withdrawal from worldly concerns. These traits are sufficiently open to interpretation that they leave the question of whether Sandor's retreat constitutes redemption or surrender entirely unanswered. The carefully planted signs of Sandor's possible survival operate as what I have previously identified as a "convincing surprise", given that the outcome is narratively unexpected yet entirely coherent with his earlier rejections of chivalric ideology and systemic violence. In refusing to narrate Sandor's redemption directly, the novels preserve the instability that defines his character, offering closure without moral finality. When read together, all the scenes from the novels that I have chosen for analysis establish that Sandor's arc consistently resists the comforting fallacy that violence and revenge can redeem moral failings (Martin, 2005, p. 517).

A definitive adaptive shift occurs in Season 6 of *Game of Thrones*, particularly "The Broken Man", when the novel's ethical ambiguity is transformed into explicit redemption, which is almost immediately revoked. Sandor's recovery under Septon Ray initially mirrors the Quiet Isle epilogue, but the series relocates this retreat into an exposed space near the front lines of the conflict. This alteration robs the location of its isolation and associated symbolism of peace and retreat, which already alters the subtext of Sandor's survival significantly. The Brotherhood Without Banners' subsequent massacre of the community serves as a clear inciting incident for Sandor's return to violence, undoing the redemptive implications of his withdrawal and replacing it with a renewed motivation for vengeance. While this shift introduces a more immediate narrative impetus, it fundamentally alters Sandor's arc. Where the novels distinguish between rejecting violence and relapsing into it, the adaptation collapses that distinction, making Sandor's story one of cyclical violence rather than ethical withdrawal. As a result, the adaptation sacrifices the consistency of Sandor's moral arc, as described by the novels, in favour of immediate dramatic value. Importantly, this approach appears to conflict with Hutcheon's emphasis on transformation as reinterpretation rather than narrative negation, suggesting a shift that exceeds what can be explained through adaptation alone (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 40; Stam, 2000, p. 68).

From Season 7 onward, Sandor is used more as a plot device to support the series' epic, fantasy elements, rather than as a character with his own arc. His journey beyond the Wall, his vision in the flames, and his participation in large-scale set-piece battles recast him as a symbolic figure within the broader metaphysical conflict that is unfolding, largely abandoning his personal emotional struggle in the process. Sandor is afforded only a few brief moments to introspect, such as when he returns to the abandoned farmhouse, as the series is quick to shift the focus back to dramatic action set-pieces. The series still gestures to Sandor's unresolved trauma from time to time, but these references are superficial. They no longer drive the plot or shape his character. Instead of shaping Sandor's character, his fear and guilt are repeatedly dismissed when the plot requires action, reducing his internal struggle and ethical complexity to a functional obstacle that can be conveniently ignored by the series when the narrative requires action. This marks a clear departure from the novels, where psychological conflict is structurally central and crucial in shaping Sandor's journey. By contrast, the series only acknowledges it episodically and with little narrative consequence.

Sandor's final confrontation with his brother, Gregor Clegane, in "The Bells" crystallises the adaptation's departure from the novels' ethical framework by converting long-standing psychological conflict into pure spectacle. Ironically, by fulfilling the audience's expectation for narrative symmetry through concluding Sandor's arc in the most conventionally but superficially cathartic way, the series robs Sandor's defining hatred of its psychological substance. Gregor's transformation into an undead husk leaves Sandor's revenge hollow, but the series propels him into the conflict regardless, reducing complex motivations into simple obsession and substituting symbolic resolution and redemption for emotional consistency. Within the context of adaptation, this scene illustrates the danger of substituting anticipated spectacle for character logic although this shift is not sufficiently accounted for by adaptive transformation alone. At this point, the narrative ceases to engage in conversation with the themes and moral questions presented by the novels so that it can conclude Sandor's arc in a violent, but superficially satisfying, death. In doing so, it fails to offer a new interpretation of the character, choosing, instead, to end the conversation in thematic terms. This choice shuts down the very ambiguity that once made Sandor one of Martin's most ethically compelling figures (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 40; Stam, 2000, p. 68).

If Sandor's arc does not logically conclude in vengeance against his brother, then the concept of "Cleganebowl" as a perceived narrative inevitability cannot be fully explained through conventional adaptive practice alone. To this end, the following section of my analysis turns to the circulation of fan theories across diverse digital platforms, tracing how speculative interpretation around the adaptation resulted in the creation of a coherent network that accumulated visibility and emotional power within the participatory media ecology outlined earlier.

The concept of “Cleganebowl”, initially a fan-driven theory speculating a climactic battle between Sandor and Gregor Clegane, gained considerable traction across various online platforms, including Reddit, YouTube and Twitter/X. This theory, though not directly supported by the thematic and character developments in the novels or the early seasons of the series, became a focal point of fan discourse. As we delve into the analysis of these online fan communities, it becomes evident that their collective engagement, theorising, and dissemination of ideas may well have exerted significant influence on the adaptation process. As outlined in Chapter 1, Jenkins’ theories on participatory culture, textual poaching, and spreadability offer a framework for understanding how fan-created theories and interpretations can circulate, spread between different media channels, increase in visibility, and feed back into adaptation. In this context, the emergence and popularity of “Cleganebowl” can be seen as a product of collective cultural creation – a narrative shaped by the fans, for the fans, and ultimately incorporated into the mainstream adaptation, albeit with significant alterations.

The very construction of the term itself is revealing. By appending the suffix “-bowl”, fans frame the anticipated confrontation through the discursive logic of mass-mediated sporting spectacle, invoking the Super Bowl and positioning the encounter as a pre-scripted event of communal anticipation. The conflict is thus pre-emptively structured as spectacle – staged, collectively awaited, and ultimately consumed. In the terms established earlier, this act constitutes a form of semiotic productivity within a participatory ecology: available cultural forms are rearticulated to consolidate expectation and circulate affect across platforms (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, pp. 7-8; Fiske, 1989, p. 142). The term “Cleganebowl” therefore functions as more than simple shorthand, becoming a discursive condensation of collective anticipation, articulating a demand for spectacle that precedes – and potentially conditions – the adaptive outcome.

Under these conditions, the question is not simply whether fan discourse “influences” adaptation in a linear or causal sense, but how visible, aggregated expectation recalibrates the interpretive field within which adaptive decisions are made. The evolution of “Cleganebowl” across digital platforms illustrates the infrastructural amplification of participatory interpretation: speculation becomes stabilised, repetition generates legitimacy, and narrative possibility narrows through collective consolidation. What ultimately appears in Season 8 is therefore legible not only as narrative resolution, but as the materialisation of a publicly negotiated expectation within a distributed authorship (here understood as the dispersion of interpretive and legitimating authority across creators, platforms, and audiences) environment.

One of the earliest visible consolidations of this expectation appears in a 2012 forum thread titled “The Gravedigging Hound: Complete Analysis” on *A Forum of Ice and Fire*. Authored several years before the HBO series concluded, the thread represents an early comprehensive articulation of the theory that Sandor survived his apparent

death and would ultimately confront Gregor. As the earliest instance retrievable through conventional search protocols and commercial search engines, its visibility is itself indicative of the infrastructural amplification discussed above: the theory had already accrued sufficient traction to be publicly stabilised and circulated beyond niche speculation. The thread synthesises and formalises the core narrative premises that would later crystallise under the label “Cleganebowl”, transforming diffuse conjecture into a collectively recognisable interpretive framework.

The original post in the thread presents an exhaustive analysis of clues from Martin's novels, particularly *A Feast for Crows*, that suggest Sandor is alive and living incognito as a gravedigger on the Quiet Isle. The original poster (OP) cites specific passages, such as the description of the gravedigger's physical stature, his interactions with other characters, and the thematic significance of his supposed resurrection, though there is initially no speculation about a confrontation between the brothers (Cosmic Maintenance Man, 2012). This level of engagement reflects a profound familiarity with the source material and a dedication to uncovering hidden narratives within the text. In this thread, fans are not merely consuming the narrative but are actively dissecting and reassembling it to support the theory of Sandor's survival and potential future actions. By extracting subtle hints and reading between the lines, they are constructing an alternate narrative that extends beyond the explicit storyline provided by the author, which is an excellent example of textual poaching. The thread quickly evolves into a collaborative discussion, with numerous users contributing additional evidence, interpretations, and counterarguments. Participants share their own analyses, question each other's assumptions, and build upon the ideas presented, illustrating how an initial act of textual poaching can lead to the creation of a participatory culture. Crucially, this collaborative process does not remain confined to isolated interpretation, but contributes to the stabilisation of a shared narrative expectation that becomes increasingly visible across platforms, thereby consolidating a form of distributed interpretive authority.

It is on the second page of the thread that one user speculates that it might be possible that the Elder Brother will represent the Faith in Cersei Lannister's trial by combat. The user further speculates that “...If he loses, whilst somehow revealing Robert's real nature and identity to the grave digging novice who accompanies him, then Sandor has his *raison d'être* restored” [sic], while another user, *God_Made_Me_Do_It* begins to develop a much more involved alternative to the prevalent “Cleganebowl” theory, which will be explored in more detail in the analysis of the first relevant Reddit thread. In doing so, Lévy's (1997, p. 13) concept of collective intelligence is vividly illustrated through the way fans leverage the digital medium to easily pool and access individual insights to construct a unified theory. The collaborative nature of the discussion allows for a more nuanced and comprehensive exploration of the theory than any single reader could achieve alone, contributing to a richer and better substantiated fan theory. In this sense, collective intelligence functions not only as a tool for interpretation, but

as a mechanism through which speculative readings acquire legitimacy and persistence within the wider participatory network.

The thread's early inception in 2012 would seem to place it at the forefront of "Cleganebowl" theorising. Its detailed analysis and the collaborative refinement of ideas provided a foundational framework that could easily influence subsequent discussions across various other platforms, as we shall see in the following discussion. Furthermore, this thread is frequently linked in later Reddit posts and other fan forums, demonstrating its significance and connectivity within the fan community. As is characteristic of spreadable media, we can see how the content gains value as it is shared and appropriated across different contexts. The thread's ideas spread beyond the original forum, contributing to the wider dissemination and evolution of the "Cleganebowl" theory. The cross-linking between platforms enhances the theory's visibility and allows new participants to engage with and build upon the established analysis. This cross-platform circulation is central to the theory's durability, as repetition across networked environments transforms speculative interpretation into a recognisable and collectively reinforced narrative possibility.

In reimagining Sandor Clegane's role in the narrative based on their collective analysis, the participants in this thread are selectively using parts of Martin's novels to create a new cultural product, as described by Jenkins (1992, p. 23). The communal efforts of the forum members also result in a level of analysis and theory-building that extends the boundaries of traditional media consumption and fosters a shared intellectual endeavour made possible by modern digital communication technologies, thus embodying a collective intelligence. This positions the thread very effectively to be regarded as a prime example of a formative work in the development of the "Cleganebowl" theory, as will be illustrated through the theory's migration to Reddit and subsequent mutation.

In examining the proliferation of "Cleganebowl" on Reddit, I begin with an in-depth analysis of a Reddit thread titled "Cleganebowl: My Alternate Theory Plus a Few Other Theories", posted by u/GodMadeMeDolt (2014). This thread serves as a microcosm of the dynamic and collaborative nature of online fan communities. It was created five years prior to the air date of Season 8 of the HBO series, in 2014, on the subreddit r/asoiaf, a community with 129 454 members at the time of the thread's creation (ThePowerOfGeek, 2016). The timing of this thread's creation would have left a generous temporal window for individuals involved in the production to become aware of the thread and consider whether the theory could be incorporated into the series prior to scripting Season 8.

r/asoiaf, as a subreddit, predates the creation of this thread by a further seven years and is dedicated to discussions about Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series of novels, making it a natural home for posts and threads that engage in the sort of rampant theorising illustrated by this thread. In the thread, itself (godmademedoit, 2014), the OP continues the theorising they began on *A Forum of Ice and Fire* (Cosmic Maintenance Man, 2012), presenting a fully-fledged alternate theory about

“Cleganebowl”, proposing a perspective on how the anticipated confrontation between Sandor “the Hound” Clegane and Gregor “the Mountain” Clegane might unfold that is markedly different than the one initially developed in the previous thread and that comes to dominate the discussion in that thread.

In this case, the OP eschews meticulous citation of textual evidence from the novels, analysing character motivations, plot developments, and thematic elements in favour of speculation based on Martin’s writing style as a justification for a complex theory. For instance, the OP speculates that, in the wake of the confrontation between the brothers

Jaime then goes completely batshit, marches into King's Landing, confronts Cersei, and strangles her to death with his golden hand (totally paralleling Tyrion's story with the “hands of gold” that keeps getting mentioned, and also fulfilling the “valonquar” prophecy. oh also I believe that makes them both kinslayers too, they're both finally equal at this point and I believe this dichotomy is an important part of G R R Martin's writing for those two). (godmademedoit, 2014)

This sort of wholesale reinterpretation of the source material exemplifies textual poaching, as the fan borrows and reassembles narrative components to construct a personalised theory that extends well beyond that implied by the explicit text.

Like the previous thread, this thread quickly garners attention from other community members, sparking a rich and multifaceted discussion. Fans contribute their own insights, challenge assumptions, and offer additional evidence or counterarguments, actively shaping the interpretation of the text through their collaboration as a participatory culture. One user responds by pushing back on the OP’s theory, asserting that “...there’s absolutely no way that Littlefinger would have the wedding at Harrenhall [sic]. The entire point of the wedding is to get the lords of the Vale to rally behind him and Sansa so they can take back the north and restore her to Winterfell” (godmademedoit, 2014). Another user, by contrast, expands on the OP’s theory by providing textual substantiation for one of their more seemingly unfounded speculations, “Ok, the Sansa blacksmith thing is awesome. I just looked up the quote and found this: ‘If the gods are good, she’ll forget she was a Stark. She’ll wed some burly blacksmith or fat-faced innkeep, fill his house with children, and never need to fear that some knight might come along to smash their heads against a wall.’ - A Dance With Dragons” (godmademedoit, 2014). This sort of back-and-forth dialogue reflects a community deeply invested in exploring the narrative possibilities of the series, highlighting the social and communal aspects of fandom.

We see hundreds of fans collectively analysing the text to bring their own diverse perspectives and specialised knowledge to the discussion in an ideal illustration of Lévy’s contention that a community can produce something greater than its parts

(Lévy, 1997, p. 13). The collaborative nature of the thread allows for a more comprehensive examination of the “Cleganebowl” theory. Fans with unique outlooks and expertise in diverse fields contribute nuanced interpretations that enrich the conversation. For example, a helpful user confirms information for the OP, “After a visit to the wikia, I should note Littlefinger is apparently playing Lothor Brune against Oswell, making them spy on one another to avoid traitors” (godmademedoit, 2014). This pooling of knowledge and division of labour creates a dynamic and evolving discourse that reflects the collective intelligence of the community.

The thread’s significance is further amplified by its connectivity to other discussions and platforms, making it a hub within the network map of fan-generated content. While there are few links to this thread, it contains a number of links to more prominent “Cleganebowl” theory sites and threads, indicating its influence on the broader discourse surrounding “Cleganebowl”. All in all, this thread illustrates how textual poaching, participatory culture, and collective intelligence intersect within fan community spaces to produce rich, collaborative interpretations of media texts. By reimagining and reinterpreting the source material, fans assert their agency in constructing narratives that resonate with their interests.

In this thread we see the fans dissecting and reconstructing the narrative to explore alternative possibilities that serve their own individual and collective interests (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23). The participatory nature of the platform enables fans to engage in dialogues that refine and expand these interpretations, demonstrating the social dynamics of the fandom. Simultaneously, the fans’ collective intelligence is evident in the way the community leverages individual contributions to build a more comprehensive understanding of one another and their theories. The thread becomes a collaborative project, with each participant adding pieces to the puzzle. This collective effort enhances the analytical depth of the discussion and fosters a sense of communal achievement.

Having examined a foundational Reddit theory thread in detail, I will now turn to a cluster of three further Reddit threads intended to provide information and resources for newcomers to the “Cleganebowl” fan theory community. As landing points and touchstones for the “Cleganebowl” community, these threads serve as rallying points for the fans and act as hubs that link to multiple additional sites in the community, while being linked back to frequently by other community satellites, such as the one discussed, above.

The first Reddit thread in the cluster under examination is titled, “Can someone link me to the original Cleganebowl post?” (BVTheEpic, 2014). It was also posted on r/asoiaf in 2014, shortly after the previous thread examined. In this thread, users collaborate to trace the origins of the “Cleganebowl” theory, demonstrating a collective effort to piece together the fan history of the concept through shared memory. The discussion references a now lost 4chan post believed to be the initial seed of the theory

and a YouTube video titled “ENTER THE BOWL”, which served as a rallying point for fans. Users share links, anecdotes, and personal interpretations, exemplifying Jenkins' notion of participatory culture, where fans actively engage in the creation and dissemination of content as outlined in Chapter 1 (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, p. 2).

An example of this can be seen when one user mentions, “If I recall correctly, it was a 4chan thread, which means it's long gone. Some people may have a screenshot, though.” (BVTheEpic, 2014). Another user then replies, “I know there's a 0:09 video called ENTER THE BOWL, which is basically the whole theory told quickly by images” (BVTheEpic, 2014), which is followed by a third user locating and linking to said video, “Found it: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FGT7NzqDRU>” (BVTheEpic, 2014). This exchange demonstrates how fans collectively build upon each other's insights, reinforcing the theory's popularity. The collaborative nature of this thread highlights the community's investment in the theory's development and its spread through the community and beyond. Fans are actively and explicitly involved in expanding the theory's reach and encouraging its spread, marking it as a prime example of Jenkins' spreadable media" where content is spread through fan communities, gaining influence as it circulates (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, p. 2).

The second Reddit thread I wish to highlight is titled, “Where did the Cleganebowl theory originate?” (rices4212, 2015). It was also posted to r/asoiaf, this time in 2015, four years prior to Season 8 of the HBO series' airing, which still provides a significant window of time for production staff to notice it and consider its incorporation. In this case, the OP is asking about the textual origin of the theory, “I've read the available books and simply don't remember anything of note about the Hound possibly “coming back”. Can someone provide me a text example of where this might have come from?” (rices4212, 2015). This request leads to responders delving deeper into textual analysis, with fans dissecting specific passages from the novels that could hint at a future confrontation between the Clegane brothers.

For instance, one user points out, “In aFFC Brienne travels to the Quiet Isle where the Elder Brother tells her that The Hound went there and died, however this be him speaking metaphorically implying that The Hound died but Sandor didn't” [sic] (rices4212, 2015). This is followed by another user expounding, “There's even more evidence than that. For one, the Elder Brother never specifically says that Sandor Clegane is dead. He says that the Hound is dead, but he may have been speaking metaphorically, as he was when he says that he died on the Trident. When Brienne says “So Sandor Clegane is dead?” his response is simply “He is at rest”. (Or possibly “At peace”? I don't remember)” (rices4212, 2015). A third user brings up a vision of Bran's from *A Game of Thrones* and then adds, “This portion of Bran's dream could be seen as a vision of a future match (or bowl, if you will) which seems to pit The Hound and Jaime Lannister against Ser Robert Strong, quite possibly during Cersei's upcoming trial by combat...” (rices4212, 2015). By focusing on and reinterpreting these disparate textual clues, we can see fans engage in a form of textual poaching

to support their theory that the Clegane Brothers will confront one another. These interpretations, in turn, showcase the fans' deep engagement with the source material, constructing bespoke narratives that extend well past the scope of the available narrative (Jenkins, 1992, p. 24).

The third Reddit thread under discussion in this initial cluster is titled, "2015 FAQ - Fuckload of Awesomeness Quota" (dont_get_it, 2015). This thread originates from the r/cleganebowl subreddit, a community with 16 000 members that grew out of r/asoiaf and r/freefolk. As might be expected given the title of the subreddit, the entire subreddit, with its dedicated community, serves as a hub for fans to share content, theories, and excitement surrounding the anticipated showdown. The "2015 FAQ" thread, in particular, consolidates key information, memes, fan art, and discussions about the theory, acting as a landing point and touchstone for individuals seeking more information from outside of the community (dont_get_it, 2015). Again, the date of the thread's creation (2015) is noteworthy, as it places a full four years prior to the airing of Season 8 of the HBO series, pointing to the existence of a coordinated fan-driven campaign focused on promoting the inclusion of "Cleganebowl" in the series.

The FAQ is organised into multiple sections based on hypothetical questions and their answers. Notable questions and answers include, "*Where did this Cleganebowl idea come from?*" (dont_get_it, 2015), the answer to which includes a link to "...A Brief History of the Books and the Show" (dont_get_it, 2015); "*Do you have a diverting video I can watch, because I have a short attention span?*" (dont_get_it, 2015), the response being a link to a YouTube video that provides a brief slide-show-like summary of the theory; and, most notably, "*What do I do now?*" (dont_get_it, 2015), which results in a call to action, "You have got hype. Help contribute hype to this sub. Post interesting or funny creations of yours in this sub about Cleganebowl, or anything that fans of ASOIAF/GoT would enjoy. Direct others towards this sub. Be a part of the Circle of Hype" (dont_get_it, 2015). The call to action at the conclusion of the original post illustrates how fans attempt to mobilise visitors to amplify the theory's visibility, embodying Jenkins' idea of spreadability (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, p. 3), while also fostering a sense of community and shared purpose.

From here, the focus shifts to the two YouTube videos linked in the three Reddit threads discussed, above. The first video, "ENTER THE BOWL", posted by Benny2kk8 (2014), has amassed over 342,000 views, despite the comparatively tiny subscriber-base of the channel (984), which indicates the likelihood that the video is being accessed due to circulation across platforms and within the fan community, rather than being viewed by already-loyal fans of the channel. The video is very short at eight seconds in length, as it sets a very rapid montage of still images and words to a pounding, fast-paced techno beat. This combination creates a high-energy atmosphere, in keeping with the fans' catchphrase of "Get Hype". The words from the montage, "Robert Strong = Undead Mountain/ The Faith's Champion = Newly Repentant Hound/ Valonquar = Little Bro Who Will Kill Cersei/ The Hound = Valonquar

Fucking Confirmed/ Let's Do It/ Tell Your Friends/ Cleganebowl/ Get hype" (Benny2kk8, 2014), do an effective job of summarising the key points of the theory and combining them with a propagandistic call to arms. Such affective intensification is not incidental, but functions to mobilise engagement and encourage further circulation, converting interpretation into a participatory spectacle that amplifies both visibility and communal investment.

The high view count and the numerous positive comments, such as, "after season 5 finale i must say: CLEGANEBOWL FUCKING CONFIRMED", to which another commenter replies, "...only after season 5 finale? Are you a non-believer? CLEGANEBOWL was confirmed even before the beginning of times!" reflect the video's resonance within the fan community. While this video is an excellent example of textual poaching, as previously discussed, it also functions as an eminently spreadable meme, with its rapid montage of dramatic visuals and music creating an emotionally charged experience that lends itself to circulation within and beyond the fan community.

Similarly, the "Cleganebowl" video published by Shane Ysais (2014), which has attracted 110 109 views despite originating from a channel with only twelve subscribers, reinforces the circulation dynamics observed in "ENTER THE BOWL". Even though this video superficially mirrors my previous example in its use of rapid editing techniques and hype-oriented aesthetics, it displays a higher production value and more advanced level of technical execution. At nineteen seconds long, the video includes short clips from the series interspersed and overlaid with animated, propagandistic text and relevant memes, resulting in a more polished product that sustains momentum and intensifies emotional engagement. Viewer responses such as "I. Can't. Fucking. Stop. WATCHING", "When Robert Strong is revealed, there better be filthy dubstep playing the background", and "Calling it right now, #Cleganebowl for this season's cliffhanger!" attest to the success of this heightened audiovisual intensity in generating repeated engagement and communal enthusiasm.

As with the previous video, the success of Ysais' "Cleganebowl" illustrates the degree to which fan-produced media circulates independently of individual creators, moving through fan networks and beyond while contributing to a growing shared narrative momentum. The comments section of the video functions as more than a space for direct commentary on the video, as dialogue extends to expressions of genuine excitement and further speculation about how the event might transpire. In doing so, the comments section becomes an extension of the interpretive process itself, where meaning is collectively reinforced through repetition and public affirmation. This allows the space to effectively become an extension of the process of circulation, itself. In this context, the sizeable discrepancy between view counts and subscriber numbers suggests that visibility and engagement are driven far more by communal sharing and repeated circulation than they are by channel loyalty or creator reputation. The implication for my broader argument here is that narrative authority and standing inside

the fandom are produced through collective approval and sustained fan-driven movement, as opposed to any single, direct act of authorship, reinforcing the decentralised dynamics of meaning-making that structure participatory fan cultures.

I have included three additional YouTube videos that further corroborate the pattern established by my two primary examples, above. Even though these videos largely employ the same thematic and formal strategies already examined, their consistently high production values are noteworthy. The degree of technical competence, in terms of pacing, editing, sound design and visual coherence, on display across these fan-made creations highlights a level of media literacy that adds polish and a degree of legitimacy to these fan productions. This competence does more than illustrate aesthetic ambition, as it also enables circulation by shaping fan-created media to meet platform content standards and audience expectations. Hence, we can see how better production quality can result in more sustained visibility and a greater degree of spreadability within the community.

One particularly striking example is “Cleganebowl.avi” by Mr Venturboy (2014), which has accrued 1 489 751 views. Once again, this level of engagement provides evidence that the video functions as a rallying point within the fandom. The view count marks it as a piece of content that is likely returned to and linked frequently across platforms. Its prominence illustrates how cultural visibility is produced through circulation where the cumulative effect of viewing and sharing creates a type of social momentum that surpasses any individual creator’s influence.

A similar pattern can be observed in the “Cleganebowl GET HYPE” video hosted on Podrick the Pimp’s YouTube channel (2015), which explicitly links back to the r/Cleganebowl subreddit in its description. This cross-platform connectivity strengthens circulation by embedding the video within a more widespread network of fan discourse, allowing content to move fluidly between Reddit and YouTube and vice versa. Through this connection, the video both extends the reach of the “Cleganebowl” narrative and reinforces the cross-platform circulation responsible for sustaining and amplifying fan engagement.

The same circulation dynamics are visible in fan engagement surrounding the song “*What is Hype May Never Die*” by Beyond Repair (2016), a fully produced musical work derived from the “Cleganebowl” meme and distributed via both YouTube and Spotify. Unlike the fan-made videos discussed above, this song represents a point at which fan-created media was circulated beyond Reddit and YouTube into monetised streaming ecosystems, indicating that the meme had achieved sufficient visibility and recognisability to draw attention beyond the immediate fan community. In this sense, the song marks a threshold moment where fan-driven circulation allows partial cross-over into more mainstream cultural spaces.

This function becomes particularly apparent in the Reddit threads that link directly to the song. Rather than focusing on interpretive discussion and theory-crafting, these threads provide evidence of the density and reach of the song’s circulation, repeatedly

pointing to it as a shared reference point intended to build excitement within the fan discourse. On r/freefolk, for example, a meme depicting the Hound responding “Hype” to Septon Ray’s question “What kept you alive?” prompts enthusiastic engagement before resulting in a link to the music video. Similar dynamics are visible on r/gameofthrones, where threads titled “What is Hype May Never Die (Original Song)” and “Cleganebowl is More Likely Than Ever” integrate the song into broader discussion of the series, reinforcing its status as a recognised rallying point.

The cross-platform movement of “*What is Hype May Never Die*” illustrates how fan-created meaning can circulate with sufficient force to escape the boundaries of fandom while remaining firmly rooted in communal adoption rather than institutional endorsement. The development of the song, from meme to fan discourse, to professionally produced music video circulated on mainstream platforms, demonstrates how visibility and legitimacy can emerge directly from circulation, reinforcing the broader argument that narrative prominence within participatory cultures is generated collectively and retrospectively, rather than conferred authoritatively at the point of origin.

Moving on from YouTube and its associations to the larger Cleganebowl fan community, but continuing the theme of visual media, I wish to discuss three examples of meme images sourced from Imgur.com. Imgur.com is a large image-sharing site popularised by its ease of use, as images can be easily linked to or embedded in other media, such as websites and forum posts. There is ample evidence, in the form of archived Reddit threads and social media posts containing now-defunct Imgur links, that there many more images related to Cleganebowl were hosted on the site in the past, though these images have since been removed, leaving posts and discussions littered with broken links.

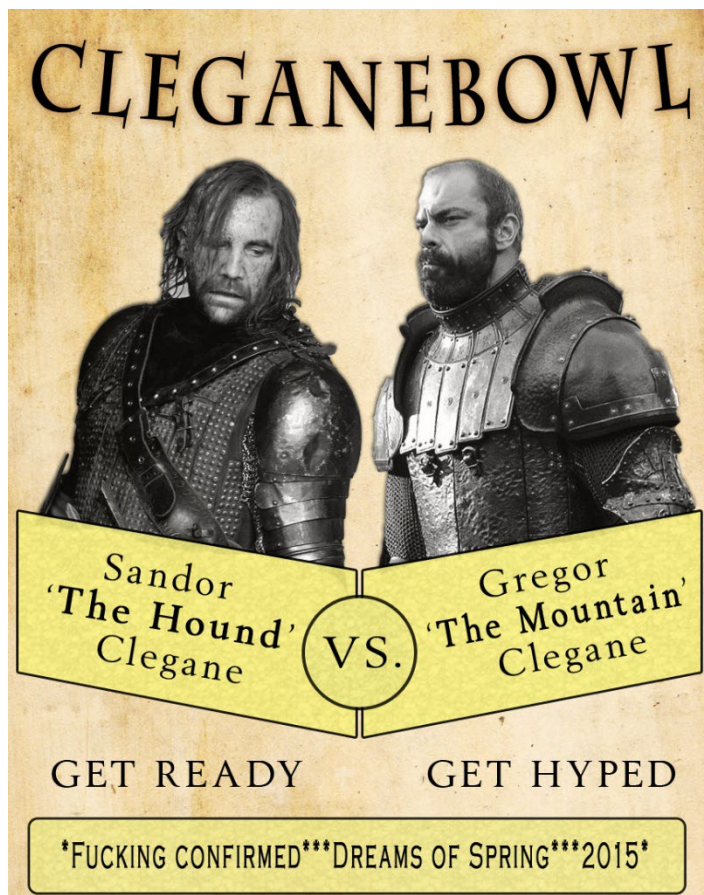


Figure 1: The “Cleganebowl” Get Hyped Visual meme.

The most prominent meme examined here, titled “*Cleganebowl Get Hype*” (pictured above), was uploaded to Imgur in 2014 and has garnered 5,109 views to date. The image visually condenses the anticipation surrounding the theorised confrontation between the Clegane brothers, very similar stylistic tactics to those previously observed in the fan-crafted YouTube hype videos discussed earlier. As was the case in those videos, the meme uses dramatic juxtaposition, bold contrast, and directly forceful language to excite those viewing it and build anticipation. Stark, high-contrast black-and-white images poached from the HBO series are paired with bold typography declaring “CLEGANEBOWL”, “GET READY”, and “GET HYPED”. This produces a static version of the audiovisual escalation and rhythmic build-up employed in the music-video edits.

The meme does not operate in isolation, demonstrating how familiar fan practices are adapted across different forms of media. This adaptability enables the rapid condensation and redistribution of narrative expectation, allowing complex interpretive positions to circulate in simplified, highly transmissible forms. The extraction and recontextualisation of recognisable imagery mirror the visual sampling techniques displayed by the creators of the videos, while the repeated call to “GET HYPED” creates a similar effect to the musical drops and text overlays analysed earlier: as both an expression of anticipation and a call to collective participation. We can see how this

meme transforms the same speculative fan narrative into a different format, reinforcing collective anticipation for a confrontation that was absent from the original text.

The circulation of the meme through many of the same channels places it inside the same participatory network as the videos examined earlier in this chapter. Its concise visual design, along with Imgur's sharing features, make it easy to circulate across different online spaces, allowing it to travel between communities and to be re-embedded within ongoing discussions. Read alongside my earlier examples, the meme illustrates how participatory culture functions through an interconnected web of stylistic and rhetorical tactics that are consistently reused and adapted across platforms, as opposed to being isolated acts of fan production confined to individual media channels.

When considered alongside the fan-made videos, the "Cleganebowl Get Hyped" meme illustrates Lévy's concept of collective intelligence (Lévy, 1997, p. 13), as outlined in Chapter 1, as it is also an example of a digital creation capable of acting as a catalyst for collective engagement, rallying fans around a shared idea and facilitating the exchange of interpretation and enthusiasm. As is the case with the videos, the meme's effectiveness lies in its simplicity and emotional resonance. All these media distil complex theories and anticipation into immediate and impactful visual messages. This accessibility allows these sorts of media to circulate across linguistic and cultural contexts with very little reliance on extended verbal explanation, making them easy for a broad audience to understand. Thus, this meme becomes another kind of touchstone within the community, reinforcing group identity and solidarity. At this point, interpretation is no longer confined to textual engagement but becomes embedded within shared symbolic artefacts that sustain communal expectation across time and platforms.

Having examined the "Cleganebowl Get Hyped" meme and discussed its potential relevance to the phenomenon of the fan community that rallied around the call to "Get Hype", I include two additional, if less prominent, memes also located on Imgur.com.

Uploaded in 2014 and receiving 2,234 views, the first meme (Figure 2, pictured on the next page) consists of a sequence of still images taken from a single scene in the HBO series, repurposed to stage a fan-generated dialogue about the Cleganebowl theory. Functioning as more than a tool to generate hype, the meme overwrites the original dialogue with a speculative conversation that both asserts and questions the theory's validity, transforming the scene into a visual representation of intra-fandom debate.

The sequential arrangement of the stills from top to bottom allows the meme to create replacement dialogue, thus altering the nature of the scene, as opposed to commenting on it. Escalating declarations of confirmation and anticipation are interrupted by a sceptical query in the final frame, embedding dissent and confusion alongside enthusiasm within the same visual object. In this way, the characters are used as mouthpieces in the fan discussion, and the scene is restructured to account for multiple fan positions.



Figure 2: The “Cleganebowl” *Fucking Confirmed* Visual meme.

This type of overwriting differentiates this meme from the more declarative examples discussed in this chapter. While it lacks the visual impact and circulation metrics of the more prominent hype images, it is significant because it models participatory engagement on a structural level. This meme acts as a node inside the wider network of fan production, where humour and debate circulate through shared resources. When considered with the other fan-created media discussed in this chapter, it illustrates how participatory culture operates as an interconnected web, with recurring stylistic tactics adapted across media to support collective meaning-making.

Finally, the meme (Figure 3) pictured on the following page, having 1,748 views, presents a satirical mock-up of a leaked draft cover for George R. R. Martin’s anticipated novel *The Winds of Winter*. Unlike the other fan creations discussed in this section, which repurpose narrative moments, audiovisual styles, or character dynamics from the television series, this meme appropriates a production-level paratext commonly associated with the authorial and publishing domains. By co-opting the visual style of an official book cover and framing it as a prematurely revealed draft,

the meme symbolically narrows the gap between fans and the institutional apparatus that supports mainstream media production.

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THE WINDS OF WINTER

Figure 3: Winds of Winter mock-up cover meme.

Although the image does not directly advance the “Cleganebowl” theory through speculation or hype, it is significant because it reclaims and subverts a traditional symbol of authorial authority. The humour of the image can be found in the fan community’s appropriation of the author’s unpublished material and its conversion into a site of collective commentary through clever wordplay. When considered alongside the other fan creations I have already discussed, this mock cover illustrates how participatory culture can extend beyond narrative interpretation into the paratextual structures that shape anticipation and legitimacy. Having traced how fans repurpose promotional, aesthetic, dialogic, and authorial forms within the franchise, the following section turns to the ways that fan-produced media can come to circulate beyond the community itself, moving from Reddit into wider and more visibly mainstream social and media networks.

A Reddit thread titled “S7 Cleganebowl Season 7 Poster”, posted to r/gameofthrones in 2017 by ThePixelFactor, introduces a fan-made poster (Figure 4, pictured on the following page) that abstractly visualises the anticipated confrontation between the

Clegane brothers. Like the mock book cover discussed above, the poster appropriates a paratextual form traditionally produced by studios and marketing departments, repurposing the visual language of official promotional material to give voice to fan expectations ahead of confirmation by the narrative.

Shared within the Reddit thread, the poster quickly attracts attention from the r/gameofthrones community and links directly to a Twitter/X post by its creator, acting as both a speculative fan creation and a conduit between platforms. Through this dual role, the poster acts as an intersection between producer-style paratextual creation and networked circulation, effectively bridging fan-driven meaning-making and wider social media visibility. Having examined the way that the poster repurposes a promotional format traditionally used by studio, the following analysis traces how this fan-produced paratext circulates across platforms, moving from Reddit into wider social and media networks.



Figure 4: The fan-made “Cleganebowl” Winter is Here poster featured on Twitter/X.

Following directly from the Reddit thread, the Twitter/X post by ThePixelFactor is a pivotal piece in this network of fan interactions. The post showcases the same Cleganebowl Season 7 poster and includes media tags that enhance its visibility on the platform. The use of hashtags such as #GameofThrones and #Cleganebowl, along with the tagging of large Twitter/X communities, such as @GameOfThrones, and prominent individuals, like @Hafþór J Björnsson (who portrayed the Mountain in the HBO series), a gesture that collapses the traditional separation between fans and production by treating an actor as directly addressable within fan discourse.

An important feature of ThePixelFactor's Twitter/X post is its capacity for reposting, enabling the fan-created poster to move beyond the relatively bounded interpretive spaces of Reddit and into wider, outward-facing networks. Unlike Reddit threads, which consolidate communal speculation through extended dialogue, reposting on Twitter/X enables rapid amplification of the message, allowing fan discourse to travel independently of any single community or creator. This shift from deliberation to amplification marks a critical transition, as interpretive positions are no longer debated but circulated at scale, increasing their visibility within both fan and production-facing environments. In this setting, users who repost the meme act as participants by publicly signalling their support for the "Cleganebowl" theory, transforming circulation into a visible measure of collective investment. The visibility attained by the poster is therefore the result of sustained fan-driven movement across interconnected networks, rather than creative authority or platform endorsement.

The final piece in this network is the inclusion of ThePixelFactor's Twitter/X post in a *Mashable* article "Cleganebowl: The Hound is back and fans are ready for his revenge" (Joho, 2017). The title of this article is already revealing, because it treats "Cleganebowl" as a familiar and self-evident point of reference, placing fan anticipation front and centre and positioning a marginal fan theory as a shared cultural touchstone. Beyond the title, the article is significant, as it establishes a direct link between the fan communities and mainstream media. By quoting the Twitter/X post and featuring the fan-made poster, along with linking directly to r/, and the previously discussed Reddit thread titled "Hype" (posted to r/freefolk), the article very capably bridges the gap between grassroots fan activities and professional journalism. This connection illustrates the convergence of fan-driven discourse and mainstream media coverage, as fan-created material is incorporated into professional journalism. The mainstream media's acknowledgment of fan-generated content not only validates the efforts of the fan community but also amplifies the reach and legitimacy of the "Cleganebowl" theory.

The web created by this Twitter/X post does not end with the *Mashable* article, however, as the article links further to additional mainstream media sources, including a *Gizmodo* article and a piece from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, illustrating how fan-created discourse can circulate beyond its original online communities and into geographically distant mainstream media contexts. The *Gizmodo* article titled "Everything You Need to Know About Cleganebowl, Game of Thrones' Best Theory" (Whitbrook, 2017) provides a comprehensive breakdown of the "Cleganebowl" theory. It delves into every aspect of the theory, including its origin, textual evidence supporting it, and fan interpretations of the circumstances surrounding the anticipated clash between the Clegane brothers. By offering such an in-depth analysis, we can see how the article serves as a conduit for disseminating fan theories to a broader, more mainstream, audience.

This article's connection to the *Mashable* article further highlights the often-intertextual nature of mainstream media, as different outlets contribute to the amplification of fan-generated content through their relationships with one another. This interconnectivity

reinforces and accelerates the circulation of the “Cleganebowl” theory in the mainstream, as each media platform builds upon the others' coverage, further diversifying audience exposure through their individual readerships, as outlined by Jenkins in Chapter 1.

While illustrating the same interconnectivity as the *Gizmodo* article, the *Sydney Morning Herald* article titled “Rory McCann on Game of Thrones’ brutal conditions and that Cleganebowl theory” (Wilson, 2017) is particularly significant for an entirely different reason. This article comprises a lengthy and enlightening interview with Rory McCann, the actor who portrays Sandor “the Hound” Clegane, during which the “Cleganebowl” theory is discussed. Known for his general reclusiveness and aversion to attention, McCann acknowledges his awareness of the “Cleganebowl” theory despite not even owning a television.

Early in the interview, McCann admits that “[t]he first problem has been that I don’t watch the show. I’m a bit different that way, I don’t watch telly at all. So when I met the other actors [for Season 7] I didn’t know who they were” (Wilson, 2017). While later in the interview, he reveals that he is well aware of the fan theory, referring to it as, “That Cleganebowl shite” (Wilson, 2017). These statements crucially establish a direct and verifiable connection between the online fan communities and a prominent member of the production, confirming the successful collapse of the distance between the fans and the production discussed earlier in this chapter. This ably demonstrates the pervasive reach of the “Cleganebowl” theory, having reached the notice of a notoriously reclusive actor, consistent with the collective intelligence framework outlined in Chapter 1. McCann's awareness of the “Cleganebowl” theory also effectively highlights the impact of participatory culture on the media production process. The fact that fan-generated theories have reached the actors themselves indicates a significant level of engagement and influence, potentially affecting how the narrative is perceived, and how fan expectations are negotiated around its development.

By featuring the Twitter/X post and linking to in-depth analyses like the *Gizmodo* article, mainstream media platforms, like *Mashable*, contribute to the convergence dynamics described in Chapter 1. The interaction between fan-generated content and mainstream media coverage exemplifies this convergence, blurring the lines between producers and consumers. Furthermore, the interview with Rory McCann in the *Sydney Morning Herald* serves as a tangible example of how fan theories can permeate the production sphere. McCann's acknowledgment of the “Cleganebowl” theory indicates that fan discourses can reach and potentially influence those involved in creating the media. This thorough examination of Reddit threads, YouTube videos, and fan-created memes demonstrates how the Cleganebowl theory proliferated within online fan communities, in accordance with the participatory and collective dynamics outlined earlier in this chapter. To further illustrate the spread and influence of this theory, Figure 5 presents a network map highlighting the relationships between the various fan sites and mainstream media articles.

Figure 5: Network map illustrating relationships between “Cleganebowl”-related fan sites.

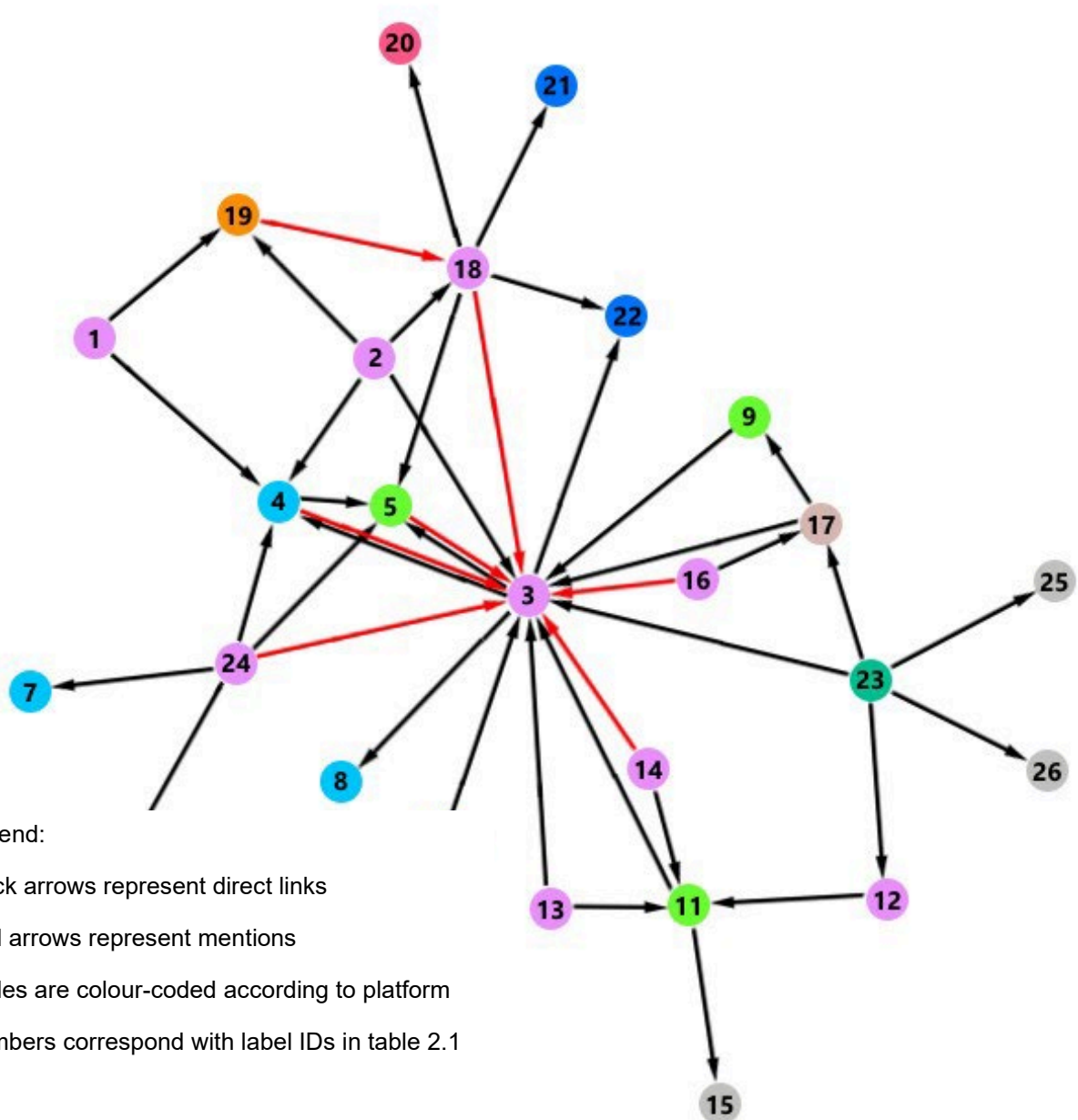


Table 1: Expanded Network Map Site Information						
ID	Label	Type	Date	Platform	Views	Subscribers
1	r/asoiaf Thread: Can someone link me to the original Cleganebowl post?	Reddit Thread	03/05/2014	Reddit	N/A	949 000

2	r/asoiaf Thread: Where did the Cleganebowl theory originate?	Reddit Thread	29/03/2015	Reddit	N/A	949 000
3	r/cleganebowl Thread: 2015 FAQ - Fuckload of Awesomeness Quota	Reddit Thread	20/02/2015	Reddit	N/A	16 000
4	YouTube Video: ENTER THE BOWL	YouTube Video	21/06/2013	YouTube	342 865	984
5	YouTube Video: CLEGANEBOWL	YouTube Video	18/06/2014	YouTube	110 109	12
6	Imgur Meme: Cleganebowl - Get Ready, Get Hyped	Image	03/02/2014	Imgur	5 109	N/A
7	Imgur Meme: Cleganebowl - Fucking Confirmed	Image	03/02/2014	Imgur	2 234	N/A
8	Imgur Meme: The Winds Of Winter George R.R. Martin - Leaked Draft Design for Book Cover.	Image	11/10/2014	Imgur	1 748	N/A
9	YouTube Video: CLEGANEBOWL.avi	YouTube Video	03/07/2014	YouTube	1 481 758	309
10	YouTube Video: CLEGANEBOWL GET HYPE	YouTube Video	30/03/2015	YouTube	450 495	201
11	YouTube Video: What Is Hype May Never Die (Game Of Thrones Song)	YouTube Video	19/06/2016	YouTube	156 959	6 031
12	r/freefolk Thread: Hype	Reddit Thread	12/08/2017	Reddit	N/A	1 200 000
13	r/gameofthrones Thread: [EVERYTHING] "What Is Hype May Never Die" - Original Cleganebowl Song	Reddit Thread	19/06/2016	Reddit	N/A	3 400 000
14	r/gameofthrones Thread: [EVERYTHING] CleganeBowl Is More Likely Than Ever After Season 6 - Theory	Reddit Thread	09/07/2016	Reddit	N/A	3 400 000
15	Spotify Song: Beyond Repair - What is Hype May Never Die	Spotify Song	13/06/2016	Spotify	29 055	N/A
16	r/gameofthrones Thread: [S7] Cleganebowl Season 7 Poster	Reddit Thread	04/07/2017	Reddit	N/A	3 400 000
17	X Post: Hound. Mountain. Get hype!	X Post	03/07/2017	X	215 Reposts	N/A
18	r/asoiaf Thread: Cleganebowl - My alternate theory (plus a few other bits) (Spoilers TWOW)	Reddit Thread	16/04/2014	Reddit	N/A	949 000

19	A Forum of Ice and Fire Thread: The Gravedigging Hound - Complete analysis	Forum Thread	10/01/2012	A Forum of Ice and Fire	N/A	N/A
20	Blog Post: THE BLACK BAT	Blog Post	N/A	Personal Blog Site	N/A	N/A
21	A Wiki of Ice and Fire Entry: Gravedigger/Theories	Wiki Entry	N/A	A Wiki of Ice and Fire	N/A	N/A
22	A Wiki of Ice and Fire Entry: Robert Strong/Theories	Wiki Entry	N/A	A Wiki of Ice and Fire	N/A	N/A
23	Mashable Article: Will the most hyped 'Game of Thrones' fight ever finally go down in the season finale?	Article	27/08/2017	Mashable	N/A	N/A
24	r/asoiaf Thread: (Spoiler All) Can somebody summarize Cleganebowl for me?	Reddit Thread	02/02/2014	Reddit	N/A	949 000
25	Gizmodo Article: Everything You Need to Know About 'Cleganebowl,' Game of Thrones' Most Hyped Fan Theory	Article	27/06/2017	Gizmodo	N/A	N/A
26	Sydney Morning Herald Article: Rory McCann on Game of Thrones' 'brutal' conditions and that Cleganebowl theory	Article	01/08/2017	Sydney Morning Herald	N/A	N/A

As depicted in the network map and table, above, the “Cleganebowl” theory’s journey from niche forums to mainstream media outlets illustrates the impact of modern digital technologies on the dissemination of marginal fan theories, as described in Chapter 1. This visualisation serves as a bridge to the following analysis of how mainstream media articles and the creators of the HBO series responded to the widespread fan discourse.

Several articles published in 2019, around the time of the release of Season 8 of the HBO series, warrant a close examination. These articles were clearly written to “cash in” on the publicity surrounding the release of the final season of the series through the use of the fan theories that had been circulating on the internet up to that point, making them particularly relevant to this study. Given their subject matter, these articles contribute directly to our understanding of how fan theories, like “Cleganebowl”, can permeate mainstream discourse and potentially influence the narrative decisions of creators, as I contend they did in the final season of *Game of Thrones*.

The *Esquire* article titled “Every Major ‘Game of Thrones’ Theory for Season Eight” (The Esquire Editors, 2019) compiles prominent fan theories circulating before the premiere of Season 8, including “Cleganebowl”. By presenting these theories to a mainstream audience, the article illustrates how fan-generated content has been adopted and spread by established media outlets and, in doing so, signals that the hype surrounding “Cleganebowl” had already reached a level of mainstream recognisability. In a case such as this, we can see how the knowledge of the fan theories is being disseminated by the anonymous journalist responsible for the article, as they have researched and compiled the fan theories into a single source. While this article was released very close to the air date of Season 8, so none of the content would have been actionable by the HBO production team, given the length of production schedules, the article still illustrates that the information would be readily available for anyone with sufficient interest to seek it out without too much difficulty.

In the *Entertainment Weekly* interview titled “‘Game of Thrones’ Season 8 Showrunners Interview: ‘This Is Where the Story Ends’” *Entertainment Weekly* (Hibberd, 2019a), showrunners David Benioff and D.B. Weiss discuss their approach to concluding the series. They emphasise their commitment to delivering an ending that aligns with their vision, potentially downplaying the influence of external factors such as fan theories. This tension between the showrunners’ intentions and fan expectations underscores the notion of participatory culture outlined in Chapter 1 and also provides direct evidence of narrative and thematic divergence between the novels and the HBO adaptation. During the interview, Benioff and Weiss discuss how they believe their series has deviated significantly from the course of Martin’s novels, which is relevant to my contention that Martin may never have intended for “Cleganebowl” to be a part of the narrative and that Benioff and Weiss may have included it due to their awareness of its popularity in the fanbase.

The following article from *The Verge*, “Game of Thrones’ Showrunners Discuss Daenerys’ Rampage.” (Robinson, 2019), is highly critical of Daenerys Targaryen’s sudden and, in Robinson’s opinion, poorly telegraphed, decision to destroy King’s Landing, murdering countless civilians in the process. While the article acknowledges that the showrunners try explaining the motivations behind this plot development, the author of the article remains unconvinced. This discussion sheds light on how the creators clumsily navigated complex character arcs other than Sandor Clegane’s, establishing some precedent for my contention that they handled the conclusion of Clegane’s arc poorly. While this does not directly support my contention that “Cleganebowl” was quite possibly included in the series due to the lengthy and concerted campaign conducted by fans of the theory, it does indicate that the showrunners were poorly equipped to conclude the greater narrative of the series without Martin’s novels acting as a template for their writing. This circles back to my contention that the inclusion of “Cleganebowl” is not well supported by the narrative presented in the novels, making it more likely that its presence in the series was due to the high visibility of the “Get Hype” movement.

Dani Di Placido's article in *Forbes*, titled "'Cleganebowl': When Fan Service Swallows the Narrative" (2019), offers a critical examination of the inclusion of the "Cleganebowl" event in the final season of HBO's *Game of Thrones*. Di Placido argues that the series prioritised fan service (understood here as narrative choices that appear designed to gratify established audience expectations) over narrative integrity, leading to a deterioration in the storytelling quality, much as I have done throughout this chapter. This article serves as a pivotal piece in understanding the complex interplay between fan culture and mainstream media, reflecting the central argument of my dissertation that modern fan culture, facilitated by the internet and social media platforms, can exert a significant influence on media narratives. Di Placido's article is valuable as a mainstream articulation of the narrative costs attributed to fan-driven influence once it has achieved broad visibility, rather than being evidence of fan involvement itself.

Di Placido contends that the "Cleganebowl" scene, while possibly satisfying for fans who had long anticipated the showdown between Sandor and Gregor Clegane, ultimately undermined the narrative cohesion of the series. She writes (2019):

The long-awaited fight between the Clegane brothers felt forced, shoehorned into an episode already overstuffed with action. It was a scene designed to please fans rather than serve the story.

This critique reinforces the tension between delivering on fan expectations and maintaining a coherent narrative arc. The article suggests that the showrunners' decision to include "Cleganebowl" was influenced more by the desire to appease a vocal fanbase than by organic storytelling needs.

Di Placido's analysis highlights concerns about the insidious influence of fan expectations on media production. This reflects a perspective grounded in hierarchical production structures that prioritise creative authority and institutional control over storytelling, resulting in intensified fan intervention being experienced as disruptive rather than productive. The article illustrates how persistent fan theories and demands can pressure creators into altering their narratives, sometimes at the expense of the story's integrity, as outlined in Chapter 1's discussion of participatory culture.

Di Placido's article speculates that the widespread dissemination and popularity of the "Cleganebowl" theory may have compelled the series' writers to incorporate it, despite potential conflicts with the established narrative trajectory. In fact, the article acknowledges that the "Cleganebowl" theory gained momentum through online platforms, fan forums, and social media, becoming a pervasive element of the *Game of Thrones* fandom. This is reinforced when a prominent publication like *Forbes* addresses a fan theory like "Cleganebowl", cementing it in mainstream discourse.

Di Placido's critique extends beyond the specifics of "Cleganebowl" to address broader concerns about the influence of fan culture on media production. She posits that catering excessively to fan service can lead to a decline in storytelling quality, a sentiment echoed by other critics who have analysed the final season of *Game of*

Thrones. This perspective provides a valuable external viewpoint on the implications of fan engagement, contributing to the academic discourse on the subject.

While the article primarily focuses on the negative consequences of fan influence, it also indirectly acknowledges the role of collective intelligence in creating said influence. The widespread support for “Cleganebowl” emerged from the collaborative efforts of fans who pooled their knowledge, theories, and interpretations to promote the idea. Fans utilised forums, social media, and content creation to amplify their ideas, demonstrating the power of networked collaboration. However, Di Placido's article suggests that this collective influence can become problematic when it overrides narrative coherence.

Ironically, by critiquing “Cleganebowl” in a mainstream outlet, Di Placido contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding the final season of *Game of Thrones*. The article itself becomes part of the content that is spread and discussed within fan and critical communities. Thus, the article becomes another point of dissemination, as the critique is shared, debated, and referenced across platforms, further entrenching the discussion about the impact of fan culture on media narratives in the media landscape. The article stimulates engagement by inviting readers to consider the implications of fan service, prompting discussions that extend beyond the original content. This recursive spread of content and ideas showcases how media critique participates in the same dynamics of spreadability as fan-generated theories.

Dani Di Placido's *Forbes* article provides a critical lens through which to examine the influence of fan culture on mainstream media narratives. By arguing that the inclusion of “Cleganebowl” prioritised fan service over narrative integrity, the article highlights the complex interplay between creators and audiences in the digital age. It also raises important questions about the responsibilities of creators in navigating fan engagement and maintaining narrative coherence. This dynamic can be read through Lévy's concept of collective intelligence (Lévy, 1997, p. 13), introduced earlier, in which collaborative fan activity carries both productive and destabilising potential.

Pledged to the Blacks' Tweet thread recounting of Benioff and Weiss' question and answer session at the Austin Film Festival (2019) is also significant to my argument, as it offers insights into the creative process behind the series and suggests that the showrunners may have been influenced by fan theories due to gaps in their own understanding of the source material.

The recount reveals that Benioff and Weiss entered the project with limited knowledge of the fantasy genre and the intricacies of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. They admitted to making several creative decisions based on intuition rather than a deep understanding of the source material. For example, they discussed their initial pitch to HBO, acknowledging that they did not have prior experience in television production and were learning as they went along.

One particularly telling moment in the session is the showrunners' admission that they "didn't really have any [experience]" and that "everything we could make a mistake in, we did". This candid acknowledgment, made during the same session as an anecdote about them having written a scene for Robert and Cersei, only to realise that there was no such scene in the novels, suggests that there were gaps in their comprehension of the narrative's complexities, potentially leaving room for external influences, such as fan theories and discourse, to shape their adaptation.

I contend that the extensive collaborative theorising undertaken by the *Game of Thrones* fan community can be understood as a manifestation of collective intelligence, not in the sense of superior analytical rigour, but in terms of the breadth of perspectives and distribution of interpretive labour it affords. Operating outside the temporal, industrial, and creative constraints of television production, such communities are able to explore narrative possibilities and patterns at a scale and pace that are largely unavailable to a small group of professionals working under production deadlines and competing responsibilities. The showrunners' potential reliance on fan discourse to inform their adaptation suggests that they may have, consciously or unconsciously, tapped into this collective intelligence. Pledged to the Blacks' account indicates that Benioff and Weiss were aware of fan reactions and discussions, at least early in production when they stated that the fan sites were useful to their pitch. Relying on fan discourse can be a double-edged sword, however. While it allows creators to engage with their audience and potentially enhance the narrative by incorporating popular elements, it can also lead to narrative decisions that prioritise fan service over storytelling coherence. This issue ties back to my own concerns and the concerns raised in Di Placido's *Forbes* article, where the inclusion of "Cleganebowl" was critiqued for catering to fans at the expense of the show's integrity.

These admissions raise questions about the role of collective intelligence in professional creative processes. Despite the apparent benefits of collaborative knowledge, the adaptation of a complex narrative like *Game of Thrones* requires a delicate balance between honoring the source material and innovating within its framework. The potential overreliance on fan-generated content might compromise the original vision and lead to disjointed storytelling. In this context, this outcome may have been avoided if the showrunners had employed a traditional writers' room, rather than opting to pen the majority of the scripts themselves and only bringing other writers in on occasions when they felt overwhelmed, which may well indicate that collective intelligence is most effectively employed when carefully curated by individuals or groups with a deep knowledge of the relevant subject matter.

The engagement and creativity of the fan community can offer valuable insights and enhance the richness of a narrative. At the same time, participatory culture places pressure on creators to respond to fan expectations without compromising their artistic integrity. The showrunners' experience suggests that insufficient expertise combined with the overwhelming influence of fan discourse can lead to adaptations that are misaligned with the source material's essence.

Finally, no analysis of this sort would be complete without an examination of Martin's own thoughts and observations about the adaptation, fan reactions, and his own creative autonomy, which serve to further illuminate the dynamics that exist between creators and fans in the digital realm. To this end, I will discuss a number of interviews conducted with Martin during and post the production of the HBO series.

In an early interview with *Vanity Fair* (Windolf, 2014), Martin discusses his concerns about the HBO series potentially overtaking his books. He outlines his efforts to prevent this, including accelerating his writing pace and considering strategies to maintain narrative control. Martin states, "I can give them the broad strokes of what I intend to write, but the details aren't there yet. I'm hopeful that I can stay ahead of them." This interview establishes Martin's awareness of the adaptation process and his attempts to preserve the integrity of his storytelling. It also illustrates the inherent challenges in adapting an ongoing literary work to a different medium, a situation that we have established the showrunners later navigated with varying degrees of success.

In a much later interview with *Entertainment Weekly* (Hibberd, 2019b), Martin addresses the intense fan reactions to the final season of *Game of Thrones*. Martin states that the fans' opinions will not influence the outcome of his forthcoming novels, saying, "The internet affects all this to a degree it was never affected before... But I can't let that influence me. I've had this notion of what the ending is going to be for years and years." Not only does this statement assert Martin's commitment to his original creative vision, highlighting his determination to remain unaffected by external pressures, it also displays Martin's awareness of how the internet has closed the distance that previously existed between audiences and creators. Unlike the showrunners, who may have been influenced by fan discourse due to gaps in their understanding, as suggested previously, Martin emphasises his role as the sole architect of his narrative. His stance illustrates his awareness of the pressure fans can place on creators through collective interpretation. This is further highlighted by the fact that Martin feels the need to address this issue at all.

By acknowledging the presence of the tension that exists between fans and (multiple) creators, Martin is taking a stance on the issue that, I argue, exposes the fact that he has already been influenced by the situation. In stipulating that he will not allow fan discourse to influence him, he is still responding to the existence of said discourse. Furthermore, it is entirely possible that the adaptation of his novels and the furor that resulted from it may well be responsible for the series of delays and rewrites that have now resulted in the next novel in the series, *Winds of Winter*, still having no definitive publication date thirteen years after the release of *A Dance of Dragons*. While there is no direct evidence that this is the case, it is notable that it is now more than twice as long as the previous longest gap between publications in the series.

In yet another interview, this time with *The Observer* (Hughes, 2019), Martin expresses a sense of relief following the conclusion of the television series. He remarks, "I don't think [the ending of the show] will affect the books... I can proceed at my own pace,

without the pressure of having to stay ahead of the show.” This comment suggests that the end of the HBO adaptation has alleviated certain pressures, allowing him to focus on completing his novels according to his original plan, although this now seems to not be the case, as stated previously. This contrasts with the showrunners’ experience, given that they faced the challenge of concluding the series without access to the completed source material. Martin’s perspective highlights his desire for creative autonomy and may imply a desire to deliberately distance himself from fan expectations and the narrative choices made in the show. That having been said, however, it seems quite likely that Martin has failed to escape said pressures, given the continuing delay in the publication of *Winds of Winter*.

These interviews collectively showcase Martin's steadfast commitment to his creative vision and his cautious approach to fan influence. Unlike the showrunners, who may have been susceptible to fan discourse due to their admitted gaps in understanding, Martin emphasises his independence from fan reactions. His insistence that fan responses will not alter his narrative plans contrasts with the potential influence of fan theories on the show's adaptation. We can also see that, while this sentiment may be commendable, it is also a sign of Martin having already been influenced by fan culture, to some extent. Martin’s stance suggests a deliberate effort to maintain authorial control and resist the interpretive pressures created by a highly engaged fanbase, while the delay in further publication would seem to indicate that he may have failed, to some extent. This dichotomy mirrors Jenkins’ acknowledgment of the tensions that can arise when creators navigate the expectations of a participatory audience (Jenkins, 2006, p. 137).

Finally, Martin's personal blog post titled “An Ending” (Martin, 2019) serves as a reflective piece on the conclusion of HBO’s *Game of Thrones* series. In this post, Martin addresses the finale of the television adaptation of his *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels, acknowledges fan reactions, and contemplates the nature of storytelling in different media. This entry provides valuable insight into the creator's perspective on fan influence, the pressures of meeting audience expectations, and the complexities of adapting a literary work to the screen. In “An Ending”, Martin expresses a mix of emotions about the television series reaching its conclusion. He acknowledges the collaborative efforts of the cast and crew, commends their dedication, and reflects on the journey that the adaptation has undertaken. Martin also emphasises the differences between the television medium and the literary form, noting that adaptations often diverge from their source material (Martin, 2019).

Martin then addresses the inevitable question of how his forthcoming novels will compare to the series’ ending. He reassures his readers that his books will provide a different experience, stating that while some elements may be similar, others will diverge significantly (Martin, 2019). This assertion highlights his commitment to his original creative vision and underscores the autonomy he maintains over his narrative, while offering some indirect support for my contention that an event such as

“Cleganebowl” represents a significant deviation from the narrative described by the source material.

Throughout the blog post, Martin acknowledges the passionate engagement of the fan community. He recognises that fans have developed strong attachments to the characters and the story, leading to intense reactions to the series' conclusion. However, he maintains a degree of separation between fan expectations and his creative process. Martin suggests that the vastness of his narrative allows for multiple interpretations and that readers may find unexpected developments in his forthcoming works. Martin appears to appreciate the dialogue that fan engagement generates but also emphasises his role as the primary architect of his story. He attempts to balance acknowledging fan contributions while preserving his authorial intent (Martin, 2019).

In “An Ending”, Martin embraces aspects of this dialogic relationship by addressing fan reactions directly. He engages with the audience's concerns and curiosities about the divergence between the books and the show. However, he also reasserts his creative independence, suggesting that while he values the audience's engagement, he is not swayed by external pressures to alter his narrative to meet fan expectations (Martin, 2019). Martin's approach demonstrates an awareness of this balance, engaging with the fan community while attempting to maintain the integrity of his work.

Much like Martin's assertions in earlier interviews, discussed previously, the blog post also illustrates the argument regarding the insidious ways modern fan culture can influence creators, even when they intend to remain unaffected. The pervasive nature of fan discourse, amplified by the internet and social media, creates an environment where creators are constantly exposed to audience reactions. This exposure can inadvertently impact a creator's decisions, consciously or subconsciously. Martin's acknowledgment of fan reactions suggests that he is not entirely insulated from the influence of fan culture. However, he explicitly states his commitment to his original narrative plans, indicating an effort to resist external pressures (Martin, 2019). This tension highlights the complexities that creators face in the digital age, where fan engagement is both a source of support and a potential influence on creative autonomy.

Martin's “An Ending” offers a nuanced perspective on the relationship between creators and fans in the context of a highly engaged and vocal fanbase. His reflections provide insight into how a creator can acknowledge fans' enthusiasm and engagement while maintaining creative autonomy. Martin's approach illustrates the delicate balance between engaging with audience expectations and preserving the integrity of one's artistic vision.

This comprehensive analysis of the Sandor Clegane's character arc across both Martin's novels and the HBO series, along with the proliferation of the “Cleganebowl, Get Hype” phenomenon across various digital platforms provides compelling circumstantial evidence to support the contention that the eventual inclusion of “Cleganebowl” itself in the final season of HBO's *Game of Thrones* was an act of fan

service. This inclusion was likely influenced by the expansive reach and pressure of modern fan communities. The development and propagation of the “Cleganebowl” theory illustrate how the digital landscape of the internet and social media, emblematic of Web 2.0, has reshaped fan engagement in ways already outlined in my theoretical framework.

The initial seeds of the “Cleganebowl” theory were sown in dedicated fan forums such as *A Forum of Ice and Fire* and later nurtured within Reddit communities like *r/asoiaf* and *r/gameofthrones*. Here, fans dissected and reassembled narrative elements from Martin’s novels, drawing selectively from the text to develop meanings supporting their interpretive intentions. This collaborative environment exemplified the forms of engagement outlined earlier, where fans collectively contributed to a shared understanding and expansion of the narrative beyond the original text.

The theory’s spread was amplified by the cumulative and networked interpretive labour of the fan community, as outlined in Chapter 1. Digital platforms enabled fans to pool their knowledge and skills, resulting in a more nuanced and comprehensive exploration of the theory than any single individual could achieve alone. The use of social media platforms like Reddit, YouTube, Twitter/X, and Imgur facilitated the rapid dissemination of fan-created content, memes, videos, and discussions, allowing for rapid circulation and high visibility across platforms.

The networked nature of these platforms and the speed of communication afforded by Web 2.0 technologies allowed the “Cleganebowl” theory to gain significant traction in a relatively short time period. Fans organised effectively, creating digital rallying points such as dedicated subreddits (e.g., *r/cleganebowl*), hashtags, YouTube videos, and viral memes. These served as hubs for community engagement and mobilisation, reinforcing the theory’s prominence and applying pressure on the creators.

Mainstream media outlets further legitimised the theory by featuring fan-generated content in articles and discussions. The *Mashable* article that included ThePixelFactor’s Twitter/X post and fan-made poster demonstrates how fan activity migrated from niche online spaces into mainstream media discourse, in line with the dynamics outlined earlier. The inclusion of “Cleganebowl” in reputable publications like *Gizmodo*, *Esquire*, and *The Sydney Morning Herald* elevated the theory from niche fan speculation to widespread public discourse.

The showrunners’ decision to incorporate “Cleganebowl” into the final season of the HBO series, despite its tenuous integration with the established narrative, suggests that fan service influenced creative decisions. While direct causality cannot be conclusively established, the convergence of sustained visibility, cross-platform circulation, and demonstrable industry awareness strongly suggests that such participatory pressure formed part of the interpretive environment within which these creative decisions were made. Dani Di Placido’s *Forbes* article critically examines this inclusion, arguing that catering to fan demands compromised the show’s narrative integrity. This perspective underscores the insidious influence of modern fan culture

on creators, who may feel compelled to alter their vision in response to vocal and organized fan communities.

The showrunners' own admissions, as recounted in Pledged to the Blacks' account of their Austin Film Festival question and answer session, reveal gaps in their understanding of the source material and hint at a potential reliance on fan discourse to guide their adaptation. This dynamic illustrates how networked fan interpretation can extend beyond the fan community to impact production decisions, especially when creators are exposed to pervasive fan theories and expectations.

Conversely, Martin's own reflections in his blog post, "An Ending", and through various interviews highlights his efforts to maintain creative autonomy amid intense fan engagement. While acknowledging the passionate reactions of fans, Martin emphasises his commitment to his original narrative plans, attempting to resist external pressures. His stance illustrates the challenges creators face when sustained fan engagement becomes an inescapable part of the creative environment.

Thus, I contend that the inclusion of "Cleganebowl" in HBO's *Game of Thrones* serves as a compelling case study of how modern fan communities, empowered by the digital landscape of Web 2.0, can significantly influence media narratives. The ability of fans to organise effectively, generate and disseminate content rapidly, and apply collective pressure has expanded their role in ways that complicate the traditional distinction between audience and creator, as theorised in Chapter 1. This shift has altered the traditional dynamics between audiences and creators, challenging the boundaries of authorship and creative control.

The preponderance of evidence from fan forums, social media activity, mainstream media coverage, and creator responses supports my contention that "Cleganebowl" was incorporated as an act of fan service. The digital environment facilitated an unprecedented level of fan organization and visibility, amplifying their voices in ways that were not possible before Web 2.0. This phenomenon underscores the transformative impact of the internet and social media on media production and the necessity for creators to navigate the delicate balance between engaging with fan communities and preserving the integrity of their artistic vision.

The "Cleganebowl" phenomenon exemplifies the profound influence that interconnected, digitally empowered fan communities can exert on storytelling in the modern era. It demonstrates how the theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter 1 illuminate the pressures placed on authorship in digitally networked narrative environments. As digital technologies continue to evolve, the relationship between creators and audiences will undoubtedly become more complex, necessitating ongoing dialogue and critical examination of how narratives are shaped in an increasingly networked world, challenging the stability of the author function under conditions of digitally mediated fan engagement.

CHAPTER 3 – THE AUTHOR WHO REFUSED TO DIE: IDEOLOGICAL AUTHORITY AND PARTICIPATORY RESISTANCE IN THE HARRY POTTER FRANCHISE

The fan-author dynamic that I explore in Chapter 1 of this dissertation demonstrates how participatory digital culture can reshape narrative production by enabling fans to intervene in the creative process itself. In the case of *Game of Thrones*, the absence of completed source material and the narrative uncertainty that ensued allowed fan theorising to gain unprecedented influence, with creators appearing to respond directly to popular speculation. This convergence of weakened authorial authority and digitally networked fandom illustrates how online platforms intensify an already established cultural logic in which meaning-making is increasingly decentralised, anticipatory, and collaborative. Within this context, fan practices function not merely as interpretive engagement, but as resistance texts operating within participatory culture. However, this same media environment also facilitates conflicts where the author remains present and assertive. In the Harry Potter franchise, J.K. Rowling has not retreated in the face of perceived hostile fan interpretation; rather, she has doubled down on her ideological authority, using digital media to extend, revise, and politicise her authorship. In this chapter, I examine how Rowling's attempts to reassert control over her texts and her public image collide with the pluralist interpretive practices of a fanbase empowered by the very participatory structures that once sustained her cultural prominence.

As established in my theoretical framework, such conflicts cannot be understood purely at the level of plot or reception; instead, they emerge from the tension existing between the decentring of the author proposed by Barthes and the continued regulatory power of the author-function described by Foucault. In a digital environment structured by participatory culture and collective intelligence (Jenkins, 1992, p. 24; Jenkins, 2006, p. 3; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, pp. 7-8; Lévy, Farley and Lollini, 2019, p. 6), interpretive authority is dispersed across networked communities whose readings circulate, gain traction, and resist easy containment or confrontation. At the same time, contemporary creators increasingly perform a type of authorship that is emotive, corporate, and often intimate or personalised, as described by Salter and Stanfill's "fan auteur", while queer and marginalised readers, such as those referenced by Duggan, engage in transformative practices intended to contest exclusionary or harmful interpretations. Rather than reintroducing these concepts in full, this chapter traces how Rowling's digital presence and ideological interventions exacerbate these specific dynamics, turning Harry Potter into a conceptual site where the struggle over meaning is explicitly bound up with the politics of identity, representation, community, and ownership. In this environment, Barthes' declaration of the "Death of the Author" marks a redistribution rather than an erasure of authorship, allowing authors to persist as visible and contested actors within participatory meaning-making (1977, p. 142). Rowling's case exemplifies this tension: an author who refuses symbolic death in a cultural context increasingly organised around plural, participatory meaning-making.

The analysis that follows treats authorship as a contested and distributed practice shaped by participatory audiences operating within networked media ecologies.

I contend that Rowling's post-publication interventions, most notably her ideological repositioning in relation to trans rights and gender identity, have fundamentally recontextualised the Harry Potter series. Her attempts to impose a particular authorial vision on an already-transformative fan space are not merely retrospective editorialising. Rather, they represent an active effort to reassert authority within a media environment defined by the logic of spreadability, fan labour, and networked interpretive resistance (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, p. 3; Jenkins, 1992, p. 155; Lévy, Farley and Lollini, 2019, p. 6). In contrast to the interpretive openness promised by poststructuralist theory through Barthes' declaration of the "Death of the Author" (1977, p. 142), Rowling's public paratextual interventions, particularly through her social media statements and essays, illustrate a paradoxical survival of the author: no longer a dedicated origin point, but a live participant in a politicised struggle over meaning (Duggan, 2021, pp. 163-166; Salter and Stanfill, 2020, p. 12). Her interventions underscore the contemporary author's position as a contested cultural actor embedded within participatory digital discourse.

The question this raises is not simply one of cultural politics, but of power. Who gets to determine the meaning of a text in a digitally mediated participatory culture? Does Rowling's continued authorship function as a stabilising force, reasserting narrative cohesion and moral clarity in the face of fan-led pluralism? Or has her ideological intervention instead fractured the legacy of her work, splintering a once-unified fanbase and setting in motion an ongoing battle over symbolic ownership? By analysing Rowling's trajectory as both author and public persona, I examine what appears as a 'resurrection' of authorship in the age of social media, and what this phenomenon reveals about the ideological and affective investments of contemporary fandom.

I also introduce additional theoreticians essential to understanding the dynamics at play in the Rowling controversy: John Fiske's (1993, p. 30) account of popular culture will be used to foreground the semiotic strategies through which queer and trans fans contest Rowling's authority. Jennifer Duggan's (2021, pp. 163-166) work will inform my analysis of ruptured interpretive relationships within the fandom, while Salter and Stanfill's (2020, p. 12) 'fan auteur' provides a framework for understanding the empowered, hyper-visible creator in networked fandom. Lévy, Farley and Lollini's (2019, p. 7) account of collective intelligence situates these discursive practices within a broader epistemological context.

I intend to employ these theories to illustrate how Rowling is not a static cultural figure but is rather a volatile node in an evolving media ecosystem. I will highlight how Rowling's authorship has become increasingly performative, combative, and public-facing. Her use of platforms such as Twitter/X and the mainstream media exemplifies this performative mode of authorship. She also leverages her own platforms, including

Pottermore (the official franchise website and editorial platform for the Harry Potter universe), to reach the 'loyal' elements of her core audience. Furthermore, her defensive responses in the podcast, "The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling" (2023), further foreground authorship as an explicitly public and mediated practice. As a result, we can see how an author's identity can emerge as a negotiated product of both public perception and self-representation, shaped by visibility, controversy, and platform-mediated circulation. In this sense, I not only interrogate the author's symbolic status but also ask what kind of authorship survives in a culture that simultaneously mourns the author's death and courts their spectacle.

At the heart of this conflict lies a paradox: the same franchise that once served as a symbol of resistance and belonging for many marginalised readers, particularly LGBTQ+ youth, is now viewed by many of those same readers as compromised, its allegories of inclusion rendered hollow by the author's own exclusionary rhetoric (Duggan, 2021, pp. 155-166; Vezzali et al., 2015, pp. 109-117; McDade-Montez and Dore, 2018, pp. 121-124). The fan practices that once celebrated the text as a safe haven have, in many cases, pivoted toward the reimagination, rejection, or active subversion of Rowling's authority. Scholars have documented how trans and queer fans in particular use transformative fan fiction and community critique to rework the ideological boundaries of the Harry Potter universe (Tosenberger, 2008, pp. 200-201; Duggan, 2021, pp. 160-166). Some fans have even taken to physically altering their copies of the novels to symbolically detach the text from its creator: for instance, trans artist Laur Flom has created custom Harry Potter editions that remove Rowling's name from the cover and title pages, offering readers a way to engage with the narrative while rejecting the author's politics (Hansford, 2023). Through such transformative works, social media critique, and activist organising (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, pp. xvii-xviii, xxi; Jenkins, 2006, p. 3), fans have sought to enact what I term a '*second death*' of the author: a culturally situated attempt to sever the text from authorial intent and authority, even as Rowling herself refuses such a fate through continued public intervention.

This tension between the fan transformation of meaning and authorial control is not a new phenomenon, but the digital landscape has intensified its stakes. Jenkins (2006, p. 2) notes that convergence culture is characterised by the simultaneous flow of content across multiple media platforms and the increased visibility of fan activity. In this environment, the boundaries between production and reception are blurred; fans become critics, authors become influencers, and textual meaning becomes a site of ongoing negotiation. Yet, as Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, pp. 189-190) observe in *Spreadable Media*, this networked participation does not occur on a level playing field. Power remains asymmetrical, and the author, especially one as institutionally entrenched as Rowling, can still exert considerable influence over the discourse.

In order to effectively argue my contention, I will begin by revisiting the early cultural status of Harry Potter, drawing from both Rowling's own public statements and the initial reception of the books as liberal, inclusive fantasy. Next, I will examine the ways

in which the fandom, especially queer and trans readers, constructed the text as a space of resistance and identity-affirmation. Notably, these practices were at times sanctioned by Rowling herself, through tacit or post-hoc affirmations (such as the much-publicised outing of Dumbledore). From here, I turn to her increasingly combative digital presence and her controversial interventions in contemporary gender discourse, before analysing the fandom's response, including boycott campaigns, transformative fiction, and critical theory-driven resistance. Finally, I interrogate the theoretical implications of Rowling's persistence through the lens of Barthes' and Foucault's respective accounts of authorship, authority, and textual meaning.

In bringing these ideas into dialogue, I do not seek to adjudicate the moral validity of Rowling's positions, but to understand how such positions reconfigure the fan-text-author triangle, while not shying away from their material consequences. The Rowling case is instructive because it lays bare the ideological and structural contradictions of contemporary fandom: the tension between inclusion and gatekeeping, freedom and authorship, meaning and authority. In doing so, it demands that we reconsider what it means for an author to live, to die, and to refuse death in the age of digital cultural production.

At the height of its global ascendancy, the Harry Potter series occupied a rare cultural position: a commercial juggernaut that was also widely regarded as morally upright, educationally beneficial, and politically inclusive. Between 1997 and 2007, J.K. Rowling's septet became a literary touchstone for a generation, lauded not only for revitalising children's publishing but for promoting values of tolerance, resistance to injustice, and the triumph of love over hate (Gibbs, 2007; McDade-Montez and Dore, 2018, pp. 121-124). The books offered more than escapist fantasy for many readers, especially those from marginalised backgrounds. They were perceived as ethical parables, incubators of empathy, and textual spaces where 'difference' found sanctuary (Duggan, 2021, pp. 155-166; Salter and Stanfill, 2020, pp. 12-15). Empirical studies have suggested that identification with Harry Potter characters and narratives is associated with more favourable attitudes toward stigmatised social groups, including immigrants, LGBTQ+ individuals, and refugees (Vezzali et al., 2015, pp. 109-117; McDade-Montez and Dore, 2018, pp. 121-124). Within a climate of post-9/11 fear, growing ideological polarisation, and increasingly visible queer activism, Harry Potter emerged as both a narrative and a moral universe: one in which the outsider could prevail, and systemic evil could be named and opposed.

This perception did not arise organically. Rowling herself frequently positioned the books within the realm of social justice, reinforcing a liberal humanist reading through interviews, speeches, and public commentary. At the 2004 Edinburgh Book Festival, she remarked that "Voldemort is obsessed with a distorted view of racial purity", explicitly linking his ideology to historical fascism and warning that "children should be aware of racism and the dangers of racism because they are living in a society where that is an issue" (Rowling, 2016). These paratexts were crucial in cultivating a public

understanding of the books as anti-fascist allegory. In the same interview, she confirmed that the resemblance between the Death Eaters and Nazism was “entirely deliberate” (Rowling, 2016). The Death Eaters, with their supremacist rhetoric and obsession with blood purity, functioned as clear analogues to fascist and racist ideologies. Their opponents, represented in the novels by the Order of the Phoenix and Dumbledore’s Army, were framed as a ragtag coalition of misfits and moralists, driven by conscience rather than pedigree (Rowling, 2003, p. 346, 350), thus framing them as a literary embodiment of resistance to authoritarianism and bigotry. Taken together, these textual and paratextual signals suggest a strong alignment between the values Rowling publicly espoused and the moral framework embedded within her literary output at the time of publication.

Educators and researchers subsequently drew on this perceived alignment to examine the series’ social and pedagogical effects. Vezzali et al. (2015, pp. 109-117) conducted empirical studies that suggested reading Harry Potter could reduce prejudice among children, particularly towards stigmatised outgroups such as immigrants and LGBTQ+ individuals. The mechanism was identification: readers who empathised with characters like Hermione (targeted for being “Muggle-born”) or Lupin (stigmatised for his lycanthropy) were more likely to transfer that empathy to real-world others. This dynamic of textual identification leading to pro-social attitudes was taken as further proof of the series’ moral efficacy. Rowling was, therefore, celebrated as a progressive voice in children’s literature, a reputation that would later form the foundation of the disillusionment many fans would experience.

This desire was rooted, in part, in structural absences within the canon itself. Despite its progressive veneer, the series often engaged in gestures toward diversity that ultimately reaffirmed normative frameworks. Characters of colour, such as Kingsley Shacklebolt or Cho Chang, were present but peripheral, while LGBTQ+ representation was entirely absent from the novels themselves. This absence was only retrospectively addressed through Rowling’s post-hoc declaration that Dumbledore is gay, made during an author event at Carnegie Hall in 2007 (Sturgis, 2007). Although the announcement was initially met with enthusiasm, it would later be interpreted more sceptically as a form of rhetorical allyship unsupported by textual evidence. As Duggan (2021, pp. 160-166) and Salter and Stanfill (2020, pp. 44-45) argue, this kind of “paracanonial” inclusion raises fundamental questions about the politics of representation: whether an author can credibly retroactively diversify a text, and what authority such gestures hold over interpretive communities that had already undertaken this work independently.

These questions came to define a critical tension in the fandom. On the one hand, Rowling was celebrated for permitting, and even encouraging, expansive readings of her work. In 2004, a representative for her literary agency stated that she was “flattered people wanted to write their own stories” and that she had “given her blessing to fans who write their own Potter stories online”, provided they were non-commercial and not obscene (Waters, 2009). On the other hand, her willingness to engage in selective

post-publication revisions by adding to canon without altering the published texts positioned her as a kind of fluctuating god figure: absent and permissive at times, omnipresent and authoritative at others. As Salter and Stanfill note, Rowling's continual additions via *Pottermore*, interviews, and tweets ranged from major identity revelations to trivial minutiae and were often met with scepticism by fans who saw these as "contextless canon" that undermined narrative closure (2020, pp. 44-45). This instability was further compounded by her increased presence on social media, where her previously curated public persona became more immediate, unfiltered, and political. What had once appeared as tacit consent to fan reinterpretation increasingly came to resemble a defensive reclaiming of narrative authority, a shift that disrupted participatory norms and reaffirmed her dominance as the ultimate authorial voice.

In the period following the publication of the core Harry Potter novels, however, many fans embraced Rowling's paratextual interventions as progressive signposts. Dumbledore's sexuality was widely received by fans as a milestone, albeit a largely symbolic one, particularly within online fan communities that had long debated the series' treatment of difference and inclusion (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, pp. 39-44; Duggan, 2021, pp. 155-160). Similarly, the character of Remus Lupin, with his struggle to conceal a socially reviled condition, was widely interpreted as a metaphor for queerness or for stigmatised illnesses, such as HIV/AIDS. Rowling herself confirmed that Lupin's lycanthropy was intended to reflect illnesses marked by fear, shame, and social exclusion (Allen, 2016), even as she continued to resist broader queer interpretations of the series (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, p. 78; Duggan, 2021, pp. 160-166). These interpretations reflected a broader willingness among fans to read between the lines, to fill the gaps left by the author, and to imagine the wizarding world as more inclusive than it was overtly written to be. As Barthes suggests, such gaps and ambiguities invite readers to engage in interpretive labour that exceeds authorial intent (Barthes, 1977, p. 148). The more emotionally resonant the text, the more fervently readers will seek to co-author its meaning. The intense fan investment in Harry Potter, combined with the ideological lacunae of the series, could thus be understood as inviting a particularly feverish kind of participatory co-authorship.

This co-authorship was particularly meaningful for queer and trans readers, for whom Harry Potter offered both symbolic identification and a narrative of moral clarity. The struggle against Voldemort became a metaphor for standing against societal prejudice. Meanwhile, the Hogwarts Houses allowed for multiplicity of identity and the idea of chosen family resonated deeply with those estranged from biological kinship. For many, the series was not merely formative but transformative, acting like a psychic map for navigating adolescence, trauma, or social marginalisation. In this way, the fandom functioned not just as a community of appreciation, but as what Salter and Stanfill (2020, p. 78) describe as a "queer counterpublic": a discursive space where mainstream norms could be contested, reframed, or inverted.

The affective investment of this community cannot be overstated. To borrow a term from Henry Jenkins (1992, pp. 23-24), Harry Potter fans were "textual poachers",

readers who appropriated, reconfigured, and extended the text in ways that made it their own. Through fan fiction, cosplay, discussion forums, and later social media campaigns, the fandom sustained the series' cultural presence long after its conclusion, with many readers maintaining this engagement from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood. This was not passive consumption, but active world-building, an ongoing collaborative production of meaning that outstripped the author's original intentions.

For a time, Rowling's public interactions with fans appeared to agree with this participatory dynamic. Her engagement with fans through questions, interviews, and public appearances often adopted a tone that was at least rhetorically deferential, positioning her audience as an important moral and cultural constituency. These interactions suggested an awareness of the fanbase not only as a readership, but as a powerful amplifier of the series' perceived values and cultural significance. While this concord was neither fully reciprocal nor uncontested, it nevertheless contributed to the impression of a shared ideological horizon between author and audience.

Alas, this alignment was ultimately fragile. The shared understanding between author and audience was predicated on a belief in ideological coherence. It was assumed that Rowling's extratextual persona and the political subtext of her work were fundamentally in harmony. Once this belief was dispelled, the sense of betrayal was profound. The very readers who had once defended her freedom to reinvent her own canon became the first to reject her authority. Both the digital and symbolic monuments they had built to Harry Potter became sites of contestation, and in some cases, abandonment. Rowling's evolving authorial identity would not only complicate these relationships but fundamentally alter the interpretive landscape of her work.

While Harry Potter initially appeared to articulate a clear moral framework championing tolerance, resisting authoritarianism, and privileging love over hate, a closer examination reveals a text riddled with ideological ambivalence. The series simultaneously invites liberal readings and sustains structurally conservative values. As this contradiction became more visible, especially considering Rowling's post-publication politics, the fandom began to fracture along lines of interpretive allegiance. What had been a symbol of moral clarity was recast as an ideological battleground, in which fans, critics, and the author herself contended not merely over meaning, but over cultural legitimacy.

The series' allegorical structure plays a central role in its conflicted politics of identity. As previously noted, Rowling frequently framed the struggle against Voldemort as an anti-fascist narrative. The Death Eaters, with their obsession with blood purity, parallel Nazi ideology and other white supremacist regimes. Characters such as Hermione, a Muggle-born witch who excels despite her 'impure' background, and Remus Lupin, shunned for his 'condition', function as symbolic figures of resistance to systemic prejudice. Yet the logic of the series is far from straightforward. The world of Harry Potter is one in which blood status is not only referenced but structurally reinforced

through institutions and language. Terms such as “pure-blood”, “half-blood”, “mud-blood”, and “Muggle-born” are presented as inherited facts, and while the narrative critiques the ideology of purity, it rarely subverts the categories themselves, as will be explained below.

This essentialist logic is mirrored in the Hogwarts House system, which functions as a form of moral taxonomy under the guise of personality-based sorting. Students are sorted at age eleven into houses that often reflect essentialist traits: bravery, ambition, intelligence, loyalty. This sorting process is deterministic, with little space for fluidity or evolution. While Gryffindors are celebrated as noble and courageous, Slytherins are consistently associated with ambition and cunning. This narrative architecture continues to position the house as the ideological “other”, despite Rowling’s paratextual efforts to humanise Slytherin, stating as she did, in a 2007 interview that “they’re not all bad... they may have a slightly more highly developed sense of self-preservation than other people” (Rowling, 2007). As Salter and Stanfill (2020, p. 45) argue, the Sorting system “essentialises identity”, reducing characters to predetermined moral and social roles. This institutionalisation of identity, whether by bloodline or personality, undercuts the series’ broader rhetoric of tolerance, reinforcing binary oppositions that often simplify rather than interrogate the structures of prejudice the books claim to oppose.

This contradiction becomes even more acute when viewed through a queer theoretical lens. Characters coded as “other”, such as Remus Lupin, are often burdened with metaphorical afflictions that draw on the language of contagion, shame, and exclusion. Lupin’s werewolf condition is treated as a source of both fear and moral ambiguity. At one point in *The Deathly Hallows*, he even attempts to leave his pregnant wife, fearing that his affliction might endanger her and their unborn child, a decision that is rebuked by Harry, but ultimately framed as a personal moral failing rather than a sustained challenge to the stigma surrounding his condition (Rowling, 2007, p. 175-177). This moment underscores how the stigma attached to his condition continues to shape his self-perception and choices, reinforcing rather than challenging the association between “difference” and danger. Rowling later confirmed that “Lupin’s condition of lycanthropy was a metaphor for those illnesses that carry a stigma, like HIV and AIDS” (Rowling, 2016). Yet the narrative does little to challenge this stigma; instead, it often replicates the cultural logic that positions illness and difference as morally suspect.

A similar dynamic shapes the treatment of Rubeus Hagrid, a half-giant whose lineage subjects him to discrimination and mistrust. His physical size, species, and social awkwardness become markers of monstrosity within the wizarding world, despite his unwavering loyalty and gentleness. Significantly, Hagrid is physically and symbolically distanced from the institutional centre of Hogwarts. He resides in a hut on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, rather than within the castle alongside the other staff. This architectural marginalisation mirrors his social exclusion and reinforces his liminal status as neither fully accepted nor explicitly rejected. Together, these figures

demonstrate how Harry Potter allegorises marginality through bodies marked as deviant, often reinscribing the very prejudices it claims to resist.

Similarly, the series' treatment of gender and sexuality is marked by elision. No openly queer characters appear in the published books. While Rowling's 2007 announcement that Dumbledore is gay was initially celebrated, it has since been criticised as a form of tokenistic retroactive diversity, representation without risk. As Salter and Stanfill (2020, pp. 39-44) argue, such "paratextual queering" is emblematic of an authorial strategy that attempts to accrue cultural capital without materially altering the text. In the absence of explicitly queer characters, fans turned to subtext and transformation: reading Harry and Draco as romantic rivals turned lovers; imagining trans or nonbinary versions of established characters; and creating fan works that corrected what the canon omitted. These practices reflect what Duggan (2021, pp. 155-160) terms "queer reader response", a form of engagement that both critiques and reimagines the text, rooted in lived experience and affective investment.

However, the space for such transformative readings would narrow considerably in the years following the series' conclusion. As Rowling began to intervene more forcefully in cultural debates, particularly those surrounding gender identity, her role as an author shifted from liberal guide to reactionary figurehead. Her public statements, especially those published on Twitter/X and in a long-form blog post in June 2020, outlined a position that framed trans activism as a threat to women's rights. She expressed concerns about the erosion of "sex-based rights" questioned the legitimacy of trans identities, and presented herself as a defender of rational feminism against a perceived ideological orthodoxy (Rowling, 2020a). While Rowling insisted that she supported trans individuals in principle, her language echoed common trans-exclusionary narratives, namely the conflation of trans identities with mental illness, the suggestion that trans women pose a risk to cis women, and the framing of trans inclusion as a cultural overreach (Rowling, 2020b).

These statements triggered a seismic response. For many of Rowling's progressive fans, particularly those who identified as LGBTQ+, trans, or nonbinary, her comments constituted a personal betrayal. The author whose books had shaped their ethical imagination and offered solace during adolescence was now perceived as actively undermining their identities in public. Hashtags like #RIPJKRowling and #TransWomenAreWomen trended on Twitter/X, reflecting widespread dismay (Gallagher, 2020). Prominent Harry Potter fan sites, including The Leaky Cauldron and MuggleNet, issued statements distancing themselves from the author, asserting that her views were "out of step with the message of acceptance and empowerment we find in her books and celebrated by the Harry Potter community" (Reuters and Guardian staff, 2020). In June 2021, the fan-organised "Harry Potter Alliance" rebranded itself as "Fandom Forward", explicitly citing a desire to better reflect its inclusive values and to distance itself from Rowling's controversial statements (Wojcicki, 2021).

This schism illuminates the fragility of the fan-author bond, particularly when identity politics are in play. As Salter and Stanfill (2020, pp. 78-81) observe, the figure of the “auteur-fan” complicates the assumption that creators necessarily exit the stage after publication. In Rowling’s case, her continued authorship extended beyond the texts and into the moral adjudication of her readers. She became not only the creator of the wizarding world, but its ideological gatekeeper, attempting to define who could claim affinity with her characters, and on what terms. Her interventions did not merely supplement the text; they sought to delimit the meanings her fans could legitimately produce.

The implications of this move are far-reaching. On a structural level, Rowling’s increasingly conservative politics have reframed the allegorical landscape of her books. The narrative of Harry and his friends resisting an authoritarian regime was once read as a call to arms against xenophobia, racism, and bigotry. However, Rowling’s own rhetoric began to echo the language of culture war conservatives, expressing concern over cancel culture, advocating for biological essentialism, and portraying social justice movements as intolerant or authoritarian. In July 2020, Rowling joined over 150 public figures in signing an open letter published in *Harper’s Magazine*, which decried what they described as an “intolerant climate” and the rise of “cancel culture” (Bagwell, 2020). Fans noted the irony of an author who once championed resistance to systemic oppression now positioning herself as a victim of unjust persecution for expressing what she deemed “rational concerns” (Duggan, 2021, pp. 160-166; Rowling, 2020b). This inversion of victim and oppressor, rebel and regime, further destabilised the moral universe she had constructed.

At the same time, fans re-examined the Harry Potter series with a more critical lens, identifying troubling patterns that had previously gone unchallenged in mainstream discourse. The house-elf subplot, which was once dismissed as comic relief, was increasingly interpreted as a problematic endorsement of servitude, particularly in its refusal to imagine systemic change even through Hermione’s S.P.E.W. campaign (Duggan, 2021, pp. 160-166). The depiction of fat characters, notably Vernon and Dudley Dursley, relied heavily on grotesque caricature and moralistic coding. Fatness is repeatedly associated with gluttony, cruelty, and stupidity, reinforcing fatphobic tropes wherein bodily excess signifies moral deficiency. Dudley’s weight gain is presented as evidence of his declining humanity, while his forced “slimming down” at Smeltings is framed not as coercive, but redemptive. Such portrayals participate in a long history of children’s literature where fatness functions as a visual shorthand for villainy or foolishness, and Rowling’s contribution to this lineage is often uncritically reproduced in adaptations and paratexts (Duggan, 2021, pp. 160-166).

Equally contentious is the series’ treatment of ethnic and cultural representation. Characters such as Cho Chang and the Patil twins, Parvati and Padma, appear to function more as multicultural tokens than developed individuals. The name “Cho Chang” – a synthetic combination of two East Asian surnames from different cultures – has become a synecdoche in fan discourse for lazy or careless ethnic

representation. Critics have noted that such naming conventions flatten cultural difference into undifferentiated 'Oriental' identity, a trope common in Anglocentric children's literature that exotifies and de-individuates racialised characters (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, pp. 42-43). This critique extends to the broader lack of racial and cultural diversity within the wizarding world, where Britishness is equated with whiteness and all deviations from the norm are relegated to background roles or folkloric archetypes.

As Fiske (1993, pp. 31-32; 169-170) argues, popular culture operates as a site of semiotic struggle, where meaning is continuously negotiated, resisted, and rearticulated, a dynamic that intensified markedly in Rowling's case as fans turned the tools of participatory culture against the text itself. The same close-reading practices once mobilised to unearth subtextual meanings or authorial foreshadowing were repurposed to expose the ideological blind spots of the narrative; in what Jenkins (1992, pp. 23-24) terms "textual poaching", fans reinterpreted and remixed the canon, undermining its claims to moral universality and exposing its complicity in broader structures of privilege. This discursive resistance was amplified by the affordances of digital media, where collective intelligence (Lévy, Farley and Lollini, 2019, pp. 5-6) and the spreadability of digital media (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013) enabled critiques, memes, essays, and fan works to circulate rapidly, contesting Rowling's statements, repurposing her characters, and reframing the moral architecture of the series. What emerges from this conflict is a transformation in the role of the author within a participatory media ecology: Rowling's interventions were not received passively but activated the spreadable logic of networked culture, through which fans enacted a form of collective authorship that sought not only to reinterpret the text, but to reclaim it from its originator.

This is not to suggest that Rowling's influence vanished. On the contrary, the institutional power afforded her by publishers, media platforms, and her own wealth ensured that her voice remained dominant in certain arenas. Yet her authority over meaning was no longer absolute. In this instance, the Death of the Author, as theorised by Barthes (1977, p. 148) and outlined earlier, did not result in the abstract, spectral decoupling of author from text but rather in the multiplication of the author as digital paratextual persona. In the digital sphere, authors are not so much silenced as challenged. They find themselves routinely compelled to justify, clarify, or defend their claims against a chorus of reader-critics. This shift transforms the author-reader relationship into an antagonistic dialogue in which interpretive legitimacy is no longer presumed as an authorial inheritance, but negotiated through competing claims of textual ownership grounded in rhetorical and ethical resonance. Rowling's failure to maintain that resonance with large segments of her fanbase marks a turning point in the cultural life of Harry Potter. No longer a stable monument of progressive fantasy, the series has become a site of contested memory, a canon fragmented by its creator's refusal to leave the stage. As we shall soon see, this fragmentation is most visible in the ways she uses digital media to assert her vision, and the ways fans use those same platforms to resist, reframe, and reclaim her work.

In the years following the publication of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, J.K. Rowling shifted from literary celebrity to political lightning rod. Though never reclusive, Rowling's visibility increased dramatically with her active use of digital media, most notably Twitter/X. Her transformation into a digitally-engaged author marked what might be understood, in the terms established earlier, as a performative reanimation of her prior authorship. In contrast to the "dead" or retreating author proposed by Barthes (1977, p. 148), Rowling has emerged as a paradigmatic case of the 'undead author'. She exists neither fully outside the interpretive process, nor is she passively present; rather, she functions as a spectral presence, actively curating and contesting the meanings of her work in real time.

Twitter/X provided the conditions for this authorial resurrection. As a platform designed for brevity, immediacy, and viral visibility, it amplified Rowling's voice beyond traditional literary or journalistic forums. More than a communications tool, Twitter/X became her battleground. It was a site she employed for moral assertion, ideological confrontation, and affective performance. Here, she could bypass institutional intermediaries and engage directly with fans and critics. Yet, as Salter and Stanfill (2020, pp. 44-45; p. 78) argue, this kind of authorial visibility is double-edged. The same platforms that offer power also expose the author to discursive contestation, reinterpretation, and critique. The author is never alone on Twitter/X; every tweet is a performance before an audience poised to reply, remix, and resist.

Rowling's Twitter/X presence, especially from 2018 onwards, took on an increasingly ideological tone. Her engagement with gender discourse began subtly as she liked tweets by known trans-exclusionary figures such as Maya Forstater and Magdalen Berns, before escalating into open declarations (Romano, 2023a). In June 2020, amid global Black Lives Matter protests and ongoing COVID lockdowns, she published a lengthy essay on her website defending her views on sex, gender, and feminism (Rowling, 2020b). She framed her concern as rooted in "freedom of speech" and "women's safety", but her language and rhetorical structure mirrored trans-exclusionary narratives. She warned of "an explosion of young women wishing to transition", described trans activists as intolerant, and positioned herself as a survivor of domestic abuse now under attack by a digital mob (Rowling, 2020b). In this rhetoric, Rowling does more than defend her position: she reconfigures the moral coordinates through which dissent and coercion are read. The implication is not merely that activists are hostile, but that "progressive" politics itself increasingly operates as an authoritarian orthodoxy – an inversion of the ethical grammar her fiction once associated with exclusionary power. This posture closely resembles the dynamics Angela Nagle (2017, pp. 31-33) identifies in her analysis of the online far right, in which reactionary politics adopts the aesthetic language of transgression and counterculture, reframing itself as oppositional and culturally subversive in the face of a supposedly hegemonic liberal order.

This self-positioning is crucial. In what follows, I treat these interventions not merely as expressions of personal belief but as paratextual strategies that increasingly seek

to delimit what can be legitimately meant by the Harry Potter franchise. As Barthes argues that “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (1977, p. 148), and as Foucault defines the author-function as a discursive principle tied to “the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate the realm of discourses”, operating through “a series of precise and complex procedures” rather than through simple attribution to an individual (1979, p. 23), Rowling’s digital afterlife can be read as a struggle to occupy a renewed position of discursive legitimacy. In her 2020 essay she frames her intervention as reluctant but necessary, as she opens with “it’s time to explain myself” on an issue “surrounded by toxicity”. She then insists she writes “without any desire to add to that toxicity” (Rowling, 2020b). Yet she simultaneously narrates a conflict-ridden environment in which “activists... swarmed back into my timeline, assuming a right to police my speech” (Rowling, 2020b), and repeatedly codes her own voice as embattled: she “expected the threats of violence”, describes “a persistent low level of harassment”, and presents herself as enduring “relentless attacks” for speaking up (Rowling, 2020b). In this way, her authorial identity is no longer purely literary; it becomes confessional, testimonial, and political: “I’ve got five reasons... I need to speak up”, she writes, organising her argument as a numbered declaration of public duty, and explicitly linking that duty to institutional and moral registers, such as charitable work, safeguarding women and girls, and defending freedom of speech (Rowling, 2020b). This repositioning reflects the broader cultural pattern Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018, pp. 14-16) describes as popular feminism turned defensive conservatism, in which feminist rhetoric is mobilised less to challenge power than to defend it against perceived progressive excess (see also pp. 174-178). Rowling’s appeals to women’s safety and her insistence that, by “speaking as a biological woman”, she is confronting regime-based intimidation position her as simultaneously vulnerable and authoritative, drawing legitimacy from visibility and a repeated rhetoric of moral courage (“I refuse to bow down”) even as she insists she is “certainly not a victim” (Rowling, 2020b).

What makes Rowling’s case especially notable is that she does not operate merely as a Twitter/X user. Her authorial voice is reinforced by significant institutional and cultural capital. She is a billionaire, the world’s best-known children’s author, and the owner of a sprawling transmedia franchise. Her words ripple across cultural infrastructures from publishers to studios to schools. When Rowling tweets, she does so from a position of exceptional power, even as she claims the posture of marginalisation. This paradox of privileged victimhood is not merely rhetorical excess; it is a strategic discursive manoeuvre that mirrors what Fiske (1993) identifies as a key feature of hegemonic power. According to Fiske, “power needs to present itself as under threat in order to justify its use” (p. 12). In this formulation, dominant figures and institutions reframe their authority through narratives of embattlement, co-opting the idiom of resistance to sustain their cultural dominance. Rowling’s self-fashioning as a silenced woman speaking uncomfortable truths despite “cancel culture” reflects this logic. Her invocation of vulnerability operates not despite her immense power, but because of it. Her interventions become legitimised by recoding them as acts of moral courage

rather than exercises of ideological control. In this way, she exemplifies what Fiske (1993, pp. 31-32; 169-170) calls the “power bloc’s” ability to absorb and mimic oppositional tactics, thereby disarming critique while reinforcing structural authority and, by implication, authorship.

This dynamic reaches its apex in the podcast *The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling* (2023), produced by The Free Press and hosted by former Westboro Baptist Church member Megan Phelps-Roper. Ostensibly structured as a reflective, long-form interview series, the podcast functions less as journalistic inquiry than as a carefully curated defence of Rowling’s public persona. Across seven episodes, Rowling narrates her journey from beloved author to cultural pariah, framing her ideological stance as a reasoned and principled reaction to perceived extremism. The podcast interweaves testimony from Rowling with commentary from figures like Helen Joyce and Jesse Singal, both of whom have been criticised for the framing and discursive effects of their interventions in debates on gender identity (Barasch, 2018; Hinsliff, 2021). Although some opposing voices are included, they are often marginalised within the overall narrative arc, which privileges Rowling’s viewpoint. Rowling explicitly frames this marginalisation as the consequence of personal endangerment. In the podcast, she claims to have received “thousands of threats of murder, rape and violence” in response to her views on gender (Phelps-Roper, 2023). This assertion functions as a moral warrant for the podcast’s asymmetrical structure, positioning Rowling not merely as a controversial public figure but as a besieged truth-teller whose authority is justified by risk rather than institutional power.

The podcast’s very title is instructive. By invoking “witch trials”, Rowling draws a parallel between her critics and the historical persecution of women, a metaphor that resonates powerfully within the symbolic economy of the wizarding world she created. The term “witch” is not neutral here: it reactivates the moral vocabulary and fantastical lineage of Harry Potter, implicitly reinscribing Rowling as both creator and rightful interpreter of that world. This metaphor recasts social accountability as unjust scapegoating and trans activists as ideological inquisitors. The image is powerful, but also deeply misleading. It conflates critique with persecution, and disagreement with silencing.

Moreover, it ignores the power asymmetry between Rowling and her critics, many of whom are young, marginalised individuals operating with far less institutional backing. At the same time, the communicative conditions of platformed media complicate any straightforward assessment of power. In earlier publishing environments, an author’s contact with readers was largely mediated through editors, publishers, and controlled publicity channels. Social media collapses these buffers, enabling direct and often hostile forms of address. Rowling’s visibility thus produces a paradoxical configuration in which institutional authority and experiential vulnerability coexist, even as they remain profoundly asymmetrical.

In this framing, Rowling is not simply resisting her detractors; she is attempting to reassert symbolic ownership over her text by reanimating its moral binaries, namely rationality versus fanaticism, truth versus delusion, and victim versus oppressor. This process becomes explicit when Rowling draws directly on the symbolic antagonists of her own fiction. “Some of you have not understood the books”, she asserts. “The Death Eaters claimed, ‘We have been made to live in secret and now is our time.’ And any who stand in our way must be destroyed. If you disagree with us, you must die” (Phelps-Roper, 2023). Here, the language once used to mark fascist extremism is rhetorically reassigned to contemporary critics, recasting trans and queer activism as ideologically coercive and positioning Rowling herself as a figure of resistance. The moral grammar of the series is thus inverted: the symbolic vocabulary of authoritarianism is mobilised not against exclusionary power, but against those who challenge it.

On platforms like TikTok and Tumblr, users have responded to *The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling* by remixing her statements into memes, intertextual references, and satire, illustrating a participatory culture that critiques even as it reinterprets. On TikTok, creators have parodied Rowling’s ideological positions, embedding them in ironic audio clips and recontextualised fan tropes that undermine her authority through humour and repetition. Tumblr users similarly engaged in parody and discourse, with widely shared content mocking both Rowling’s rhetoric and her alignment with trans-exclusionary feminism (see Bogleech, 2022). Beyond ephemeral social media content, fan fiction continues to act as a political counter-narrative. Works like *All the Young Dudes* (2017) by MsKingBean89, which is centred on a queer romance between Remus Lupin and Sirius Black, have gained massive followings, reframing the Harry Potter universe as a site of radical inclusion by explicitly queering characters in defiance of Rowling’s authorial claims. As Duggan (2021, pp. 155-157; 160-162) argues, fan fiction offers a powerful platform for trans and queer readers to reclaim interpretive agency, resisting normative textual boundaries and producing alternative, more inclusive worlds. This ongoing activity exemplifies how the same participatory logic that once amplified Rowling’s cultural capital is now being redeployed against her, transforming fandom into a site of ideological contestation and creative dissent.

Here, the insights of Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, pp. 2-4; 295-296) in *Spreadable Media* are particularly salient. In a networked media environment, meaning does not remain fixed; it circulates, mutates, and is constantly contested. The logic of spreadability allows for multiple interpretive trajectories, many of which elude authorial control. Even as Rowling attempts to fix meaning by asserting definitive interpretations of gender, character, or canon (for instance, her post-publication claims regarding Dumbledore’s sexuality or her revision of Hermione as a girl of colour) (Ratcliffe, 2016; Stitch, 2015), her audience fragments, responds, and reconfigures. The text, once hers alone, becomes the object of collective meaning-making, governed by the principles of participatory culture and collective intelligence (Lévy, Farley and Lollini, 2019).

Rowling's digital authorship thus exists in a state of contradiction. On the one hand, she enjoys unprecedented access to her audience and the ability to shape public discourse about her work. On the other, that same access exposes her to a multiplicity of interpretive communities, many of which reject her claims. This is particularly true for queer and trans fans, whose lived experience informs alternative readings of the text. As Duggan (2021, pp. 155-160) notes, these readers do not merely consume Harry Potter; they inhabit it, transform it, and wield it as a tool of self-articulation. For them, Rowling's claims to authorial finality are not just epistemologically suspect, they are existentially threatening.

The conflict is not only between author and reader, but between two models of cultural production. Rowling represents the traditional model: hierarchical, centralised, and premised on the sanctity of the author's intent. Her critics embody a networked model: decentralised, participatory, and grounded in affective engagement. These models are not merely aesthetic; they are political. They speak to questions of legitimacy, authority, and voice. Who gets to define meaning? Whose narratives count? And what happens when those narratives collide?

Foucault's (1979) "What Is an Author?" remains instructive here. The author-function, he argues, is a principle of limitation: it defines, excludes, and organises meaning (p. 20). In asserting herself as the final arbiter of her work, Rowling exercises this function in full force. Yet, in a digital environment saturated with user-generated content, fan readings, and interpretive pluralism, the author-function is destabilised. Rowling's authority is not eliminated, but it is relativised. In other words, it is positioned alongside, and often in conflict with, a multitude of reader-authors.

This dynamic marks a shift in the politics of authorship. Rowling's case exemplifies the limits of legacy authorship in an era where cultural texts are no longer static artefacts but ongoing discursive fields. Her attempts to reassert control have only made the conflict more visible, more polarised, and more intractable. In trying to silence her readers, she has amplified them. In refusing to die, she has called forth a legion of alternative authors.

The participatory affordances of digital platforms have enabled Rowling's readers not merely to critique her, but to create expansive counter-narratives. These acts of resistance unsettle the author's authority through cultural production, social media activism, and collective reinterpretation. Nowhere is this more evident than in the transformative works produced on platforms like *Archive of Our Own* (AO3), and *Reddit*, which function as sprawling terrains of semiotic resistance.

On AO3, queer and trans fans have long utilised fanfiction to carve out narrative space for identities omitted or marginalised in Rowling's canon. Following her trans-exclusionary statements, this space took on a distinctly oppositional tone. Fanfics featuring trans!Harry, nonbinary!Luna, or genderfluid reimaginings of Snape are no longer just exploratory what-ifs; they are pointed acts of reclamation. These stories not only diversify the symbolic landscape of Harry Potter, but also dismantle the

foundational binaries of gender, house morality, and blood status that Rowling implicitly reifies. In Barthes' terms, the "scriptor" role – "born simultaneously with his text" and "in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing" (Barthes, 1977, p. 3) – is transferred to the fan author, who inscribes new meanings into the text (and, more broadly, participates in the public negotiation of those meanings) without recourse to the originator's intention. The canon becomes not a map, but a launchpad.

Even on Reddit, which is typically less associated with progressive critique than platforms like Tumblr or TikTok, communities such as r/harrypotter and r/Fantasy have become sites of sustained critical engagement with Rowling's rhetoric. These forums do not primarily function to produce new fan content; rather, they serve as discursive archives, curating a record of Rowling's ideological trajectory and its perceived contradictions with her own texts. In r/harrypotter, for example, a long-running thread originally authored by u/valkyrie765 explores the disjunction between Rowling's claims of inclusivity and the lack of gender-spectrum representation in the series, linking these gaps to her real-world statements about gender and identity (u/valkyrie765, 2019). Another popular post by u/welchhenry critiques Rowling's post-publication expansions to the canon, particularly her retroactive character revisions, arguing that such additions disrupt narrative coherence and alienate readers (u/welchhenry, 2019). Meanwhile, users in r/Fantasy have interrogated the cultural insensitivity of Rowling's depiction of Native American magic systems in her "History of Magic in North America" series, identifying her representations as both reductive and appropriative (u/vesi-hiisi, 2016). These threads collectively function as decentralised, multi-voiced, collaborative, and self-documenting critiques.

Foucault's formulation of the "author-function" is useful in conceptualising the kind of interpretive plurality Reddit exemplifies, which could be termed "dispersed authorship". For Foucault, the author is not a natural or self-evident origin of meaning, but a classificatory function that regulates the circulation of discourse (Foucault, 1979, pp. 20-23). As authorship becomes increasingly contested in digital culture, these forums perform a kind of collective counter-authorship: they not only critique Rowling's public statements but also reframe her works through crowdsourced annotation, juxtaposition, and ideological analysis. In this way, the Reddit community exemplifies what might be termed a post-authorial or distributed mode of cultural production.

This decentralised interpretive labour reflects what Lévy, Farley and Lollini (2019, pp. 13-17) theorise as *collective intelligence*: a distributed form of knowledge production made possible by networked connectivity. Fans do not only produce fiction or critique; they build shared archives of understanding, resistance, and reinterpretation. They cite each other, build upon each other's memes, and annotate Rowling's texts with the marginalia of dissent. These practices exceed traditional literary critique because they are affective as well as analytical, and are born not merely of disagreement, but of wounded investment – a condition that is illustrative of poststructural accounts of meaning being contingent and socially produced.

Crucially, this investment is not uniform. The fandom is itself riven by ideological divides. Some continue to defend Rowling, seeing her as a victim of cancel culture. Others attempt to “separate the art from the artist”, arguing that Harry Potter can still hold meaning independent of its creator. Still others advocate for a full rejection of the franchise, proposing alternative fantasy universes, such as *The Locked Tomb*, *Carry On*, or *The Owl House*, as spaces of queer-inclusive imagination. These divergent responses illustrate the complex interplay between text, author, and reader in a digital participatory culture. Meaning is not singular but stratified. It is layered with irony, affect, and ideological strain.

This contest is most visible in how fans have begun to redefine canon itself. No longer restricted to what appears in Rowling’s published texts or sanctioned statements, canon is now flexible, negotiated, and often communally determined (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 44-49; De Kosnik, 2016, pp. 351-353). Fanon – fan-constructed lore and interpretation – has taken on the epistemological weight once reserved for authorial declarations (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, pp. 40-45). Terms like “headcanon” reflect this shift, asserting a kind of affective sovereignty over meaning. When a fan proclaims that Harry is bisexual, or that Snape was nonbinary, they do so not in ignorance of Rowling’s authorial position, but in deliberate defiance of it. These interpretations are not requests for permission; they are declarations of narrative autonomy.

The political stakes of this autonomy are significant. As Duggan (2021, p. 155) and Tosenberger (2008, pp. 203-205) both emphasise, queer and trans fans have historically turned to fan fiction and transformative practices not simply as entertainment, but as survival. Thus, fan fiction becomes a means of worldbuilding that affirms identity in the face of normative erasure. Rowling’s actions therefore constitute not merely a political disagreement, but an attempt to repossess symbolic terrain that fans consider their own. Her claim to speak authoritatively about gender does not exist in a vacuum; it reverberates through a symbolic economy in which fans have already constructed alternative identities, relationships, and utopias from the ruins of her world. In this sense, Rowling is no longer simply an author. She has become a symbol of ideological retrenchment, of contested authorship, of the limits of progressive brand-making. Her refusal to retreat has turned her from a progenitor into a polemicist, and her text from a shared story into a site of struggle. The very platforms that once magnified her cultural capital now serve as arenas for its deconstruction.

This moment demands that we revisit Barthes not as an epitaph, but as an opening. In the age of Twitter/X, the author is never truly dead, but neither are they sovereign. Today, the author persists in fragmented form: as meme, as antagonist, as spectral presence in the text. Rowling’s refusal to recede from the interpretive field through her ongoing efforts to speak with finality about the meanings of her work does not negate Barthes’ thesis; it confirms its prescience. The struggle for meaning is no longer waged within the pages of a book, but across tweets, threads, videos, and fan fictions. It unfolds across a dispersed terrain in which authorship is always partial, always plural, and always at risk of being rewritten.

If Rowling's digital reassertion of authorial control constitutes a new form of institutional authorship, which is consolidated, polemical, and ideologically invested, then the fandom's response represents a correspondingly evolved form of interpretive resistance. This resistance is not merely discursive or symbolic; it is performative, communal, and affectively charged. In the wake of Rowling's controversial statements, particularly her trans-exclusionary rhetoric, queer and trans fans have transformed from textual poachers (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 23-24) into active agents of cultural critique and re-creation. Through transformative works, critical memes, public statements, and communal acts of disavowal, fans have not only rejected Rowling's authority but reoriented the cultural life of Harry Potter itself.

At the heart of this resistance is a politics of semiotics. As John Fiske (1993, pp. 4-5; 28) observes, popular culture is a site of "semiotic democracy", where audiences have the capacity to produce meanings that diverge from or even oppose the intended messages of dominant texts. In the case of Harry Potter, this semiotic democracy was already present in the fan fiction boom of the early 2000s. Fans reinterpreted, expanded, and queered the world of Hogwarts long before Rowling's public controversies emerged. Yet following her explicit ideological interventions, these creative practices took on a new urgency.

Transformative fan works now operate as corrective texts: imaginative reworkings that seek not just to include what Rowling omitted, but to repair what she damaged. Works featuring trans!Harry or nonbinary!Snape serve as both narrative innovations and symbolic declarations. They refuse the logic of exclusion by proliferating alternatives, asserting that the world of Harry Potter belongs not to the author but to the interpretive community. This reframing is not a retreat into private imagination; it is a public counter-discourse. It aligns with what Duggan (2021, pp. 155-157) identifies as "reader resistance", wherein trans and queer readers actively reconfigure the text in defiance of the author's ideological claims.

This reader resistance manifests again most vividly on AO3, where tags such as #TransHarry, #GenderfluidSnape, and #NonbinaryHogwarts proliferate. These stories are not confined to subcultural niches; many are widely read, recommended, and cited in broader discourse. They function as parallel canons, sites of emotional truth that challenge the legitimacy of the original. In many cases, these fics also directly address Rowling's interventions, either through metatextual critique, allegorical inversions, or explicit disclaimers of authorial alignment. The very act of writing becomes a reclamation of character, and symbolic possibility.

Alongside fanfiction, meme culture has emerged as a potent vehicle for critique. Platforms like Tumblr, TikTok, and Twitter/X facilitate the rapid circulation of satirical, ironic, and often devastatingly incisive content that reframes Rowling's statements within absurd or critical lenses. These memes operate not only as humour but as semiotic weapons, as they compress complex ideological rebuttals into accessible, shareable formats. One popular meme reframes Rowling's tweets using Harry Potter

spells (“Expelliarmus the TERF”), while others reimagine canonical scenes as trans liberation narratives. These interventions are not trivial. As Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, pp. 2-4; 16-18) note, media flows are governed by “spreadability”: the potential for content to be circulated, transformed, and repurposed across platforms. Memes, as spreadable texts, participate in this logic of interpretive reconfiguration, turning Rowling’s own modes of communication against her.

Resistance also takes institutional form. In July 2020, two of the largest Harry Potter fan platforms, *The Leaky Cauldron* and *MuggleNet*, publicly declared that they would no longer use photographs of J.K. Rowling, link to her website, or cover her personal achievements. Their joint statement explained that Rowling’s comments on transgender rights were “out of step with the message of acceptance and empowerment we see in her books” (Reuters and Guardian staff, 2020). This marked a decisive shift: the values once associated with the text were now claimed in opposition to its author. Institutional dissociation has also occurred beyond fan culture. In 2022, US Quidditch and Major League Quidditch announced that they would rebrand the sport as “Quadball”, explicitly citing Rowling’s anti-trans rhetoric as one of the key reasons for severing ties with her intellectual property (Yurcaba, 2022). These strategic reorientations reflect what Salter and Stanfill (2020, p. 40) describe as “fannish infrastructures of resistance”, in which communities construct alternative centres of meaning that sustain the narrative universe while rejecting the authority of its creator. Whether through editorial policy, renaming, or collective organisation, such institutions illustrate the broader cultural effort to disentangle the imaginative world of Harry Potter from the politics of its author.

This decoupling is both symbolic and material. This material decoupling is most clearly tested in Rowling’s franchise extensions, particularly the *Fantastic Beasts* film series and the videogame *Hogwarts Legacy*, where authorial ideology is institutionally buffered through transmedia production, licensing structures, and corporate distribution rather than direct textual authorship. Many fans have called for boycotts of official merchandise, Universal theme parks, the *Fantastic Beasts* film series, and the *Hogwarts Legacy* videogame (Di Placido, 2021; Leighton, 2023; Earl, 2023). These boycotts are framed not merely as refusals to enrich Rowling financially, but as acts of ethical disavowal. In debates across fan spaces and through journalistic coverage, supporters argue that purchasing or engaging with Rowling-affiliated content signals complicity, while abstention becomes a form of political resistance (Leighton, 2023). These actions reflect a growing recognition that fandom is not solely interpretive but also economic. In this sense, *Fantastic Beasts* and *Hogwarts Legacy* function not merely as cultural artefacts but as mechanisms through which Rowling’s author-function continues to operate at an industrial level, even as her interpretive authority is increasingly rejected at the level of fandom. As Jenkins (2006, pp. 131-134) and Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, pp. 2-4; 295-296) argue, to participate in a franchise is to confer value, visibility, legitimacy and, ultimately, power. In withdrawing their

participation, fans assert not only their discontent but their agency within the cultural marketplace.

This reorientation of value is particularly significant in light of Lévy, Farley and Lollini's (2019, pp. 13-17) theory of *collective intelligence*. For Lévy, meaning is not the product of individual genius but of networked collaboration. In the context of Rowling and her fanbase, this means that the cultural significance of Harry Potter is not fixed by authorial intention but continually reconstructed through communal engagement. This engagement includes not only creation and critique but curation, as fans choose which parts of the canon to foreground, which interpretations to share, and which texts to build upon. In this collective process, Rowling becomes one voice among many, and not necessarily the most authoritative.

Of course, this reframing is not uncontested. Some fans, particularly those invested in Rowling's personal brand, reject these critiques and uphold her as a champion of "common sense" feminism. Online platforms such as Substack have become key sites for this defence. Kara Dansky, a gender-critical writer and activist, published a Substack article lauding Rowling as a steadfast advocate "for women and girls across the globe", arguing that her willingness to speak out "despite the consequences" marks her as a feminist hero (Dansky, 2023). Another commentator, T.P. Balazs, similarly framed Rowling's stance as heroic, insisting that her critics are "denying biological reality and seeking to erase women's rights" (Balazs, 2024). These defenders often reproduce Rowling's own rhetorical strategies: invoking freedom of speech, biological realism, and the threat of ideological conformity. In her 2020 essay, Rowling expressed concern about "an explosion of young women wishing to transition" and warned that trans activism may "erode the legal definitions of sex and replace it with gender" (Rowling, 2020b). These talking points are echoed in sympathetic media, such as her appearance on *The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling*, where she claimed that many fans were "grateful" for her outspokenness and saw her as articulating what others were afraid to express (Tapp, 2023). Online spaces like the subreddit r/GenderCritical also served as echo chambers for these positions, valorising Rowling as a truth-teller standing against progressive orthodoxy (Rathjen, 2021). The debate thus reproduces broader cultural divisions, with Harry Potter functioning as a microcosm of the contemporary culture wars with its meaning contested not just on the page, but across platforms of political identity and public discourse.

This polarisation complicates any straightforward account of fan resistance. The fandom is not monolithic, and interpretive conflict persists within it. However, what remains clear is that a significant portion of the fanbase, especially queer and trans fans, has forged a coherent oppositional movement grounded in transformative semiotics, digital activism, and cultural production. This movement does not aim to reclaim Rowling; it aims to supersede her.

As argued previously, these acts are not merely cultural, they are also political. They reflect a broader shift in how authority functions in a participatory media environment.

As Jenkins (2006, p. 3) notes, convergence culture blurs the boundaries between producer and consumer, author and reader. In this context, authority is not a given; it is earned, challenged, and – when necessary – revoked. Rowling’s failure to recognise this dynamic is not just a misstep; it is a category error. She continues to speak as though authorship is a monologue, while her audience engages in dialogue, parody, and protest.

This dialogue is not only oppositional; it is generative. In resisting Rowling, fans have built new worlds, new canons, and new communities. These creations are not dependent on the original author for legitimacy. They are autonomous, affective, and often emancipatory. They function as resistance texts, understood within John Fiske’s account of popular culture as a site of semiotic struggle: cultural artefacts that challenge dominant ideologies not only through their content, but through the social practices of those who produce and circulate them. Fiske argues that such texts emerge from the micropolitics of the body and of pleasure, whereby subordinated groups assert semiotic power against hegemonic structures (Fiske, 1993, pp. 4-5; 28). In doing so, these fan interventions expand the interpretive possibilities of popular culture beyond what the author could imagine.

The resistance to Rowling thus illustrates the power of fandom not only to reinterpret but to re-found the source material, creating alternative symbolic orders in which marginalised identities are not tolerated as exceptions but centred as norms. It is a form of cultural authorship that is decentralised, collective, and defiantly unfinished. And it signals a shift in the terrain of meaning-making: away from the sanctity of the author and towards the sovereignty of the interpretive community.

The structural and symbolic refusal of Rowling’s authorial claims reaches its most potent expression in transformative fan works that overtly rewrite core thematic and narrative foundations of the Harry Potter series. These works, often tagged with disclaimers like “JKR not welcome” or “Author divorced from canon”, make no pretence of reconciliation. Rather, they are artefacts of creative insurgency: full-length alternate universe (AU) fics in which Hogwarts becomes a trans-inclusive sanctuary, Harry is adopted by queer parents, or Hermione is reimagined as Black and neurodivergent. These are not merely speculative departures; they are purposeful reimaginings grounded in the symbolic reclamation of characters and settings that many fans had once felt deeply reflected them and later experienced as sites of alienation. As Duggan (2021, p. 155) observes, these transformative readings are often acts of affective and political refusal, narrative spaces where trans and queer readers “queer and query” not only the text but its author. They operate, as Salter and Stanfill (2020, pp. 40-45) suggest, in defiance of the fan auteur’s authority, reshaping canon from the ground up in ways that centre marginalised subjectivities. Tosenberger’s (2008, pp. 203-205) earlier work on slash and queer fic² provides

² Slash fiction refers to a subgenre of fan fiction centred on same-sex romantic or erotic pairings, often involving characters not canonically depicted as such within the original text. Emerging prominently in *Star*

further context, showing how such practices have long served as alternative interpretive infrastructures through which fans assert control over meaning and belonging.

Some of the most read and widely shared works on AO3 in the post-2020 era focus explicitly on trans identity. One such fic, *Kaleidoscopic Grangers* by AdmiralPegasus (2020), reimagines Harry Potter as Ariadne Granger, a blind, transgender girl adopted by Hermione's family. Her gender identity is never questioned by her friends but becomes central to her conflict with the wizarding world's essentialist and exclusionary structures – structures that Rowling herself has been accused of upholding both in fiction and in public. The fic reframes the series' core metaphors of secrecy, transformation, and chosen family as allegories for trans experience. Without ever naming Rowling, *Kaleidoscopic Grangers* operates as a powerful symbolic rebuttal: it offers a more ethically coherent and affectively resonant political vision than the one Rowling has since tried to assert (AdmiralPegasus, 2020).

These fics often mobilise tropes of trauma recovery, collective care, and found family to counter the increasingly individualistic tone of Rowling's paratexts and public persona. In stories where Hogwarts becomes a shelter for displaced queer youth, or where Hagrid runs a safehouse for magical children ostracised by their families, the message is clear: if the original author will not write us in, we will write ourselves a home. A notable example is *Stealing Harry* by copperbadge (2004), which imagines an alternate universe in which Sirius Black and Remus Lupin rescue Harry from the Dursleys and raise him in a supportive, bookshop-centred household. The story reframes familiar characters as agents of protection and healing, offering a vision of magical community built on chosen family and emotional resilience (copperbadge, 2004). These reimaginings do not rely on Rowling's language or endorsement; they function autonomously, drawing on the emotional resonance of her world but no longer beholden to its architect.

Such works also reflect a wider shift in fan consumption ethics. For many LGBTQ+ fans, continued engagement with Rowling-endorsed products, whether it is through Wizarding World merchandise, official mobile games, or the *Fantastic Beasts* film series, has become morally fraught. Fan communities on platforms like Tumblr and TikTok have circulated guides for "ethical Pottering", advising users on how to enjoy or repurpose the world of Harry Potter without financially supporting Rowling. TikTok users, for instance, have debated whether one can ethically engage with the franchise at all, or whether even discussing it amounts to tacit endorsement (see @pagemelt, 2021; @speechprof, 2023). Some recommend reading only fanfiction or supporting explicitly anti-TERF reinterpretations; others propose community-based events that foreground queer fan labour and creativity. One such initiative is *HP Trans Fest*, a trans-affirming fan festival hosted on Tumblr and AO3, which centres trans and

Trek fandom (e.g., Kirk/Spock), slash has since become a major mode of transformative fan engagement, frequently used to explore queer identities and relationships absent or marginalised in official narratives.

nonbinary voices in the Harry Potter universe and showcases fan works that reimagine the wizarding world as inclusive, celebratory, and radically transformative (HP Trans Fest, 2023).

This ethical turn underscores a significant evolution in fan identity. As Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik and Zimmerman (2016, pp. 42-43; 238-251) have argued, digital participatory cultures increasingly demand not just engagement, but political clarity. One's fan involvement is no longer merely a matter of taste, but of alignment. To continue supporting Harry Potter is, in some perspectives, to tacitly condone its author's views and to contribute to her financial gains and public stature. This has led to an expansion of what fandom entails: beyond content creation or discussion, it now includes activism, boycotts, mutual aid, and platform migration (Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik and Zimmerman, 2016, pp. 17-18, 109, 122-123). The attempted boycott of the video game *Hogwarts Legacy* serves as a pertinent example. Despite calls for a boycott due to Rowling's controversial statements, the game achieved significant commercial success, selling over 12 million copies and generating \$850 million in revenue within its first two weeks (Maas, 2023). The commercial success of *Hogwarts Legacy* does not invalidate the ethical claims made by critics; rather, it demonstrates the structural resilience of franchise capitalism, in which authorial profit and symbolic persistence are insulated from affective withdrawal or moral refusal. Rowling responded to the boycott with sarcasm, stating she had "taken the precaution of laying in a large stock of champagne" in anticipation of the game's success (Sachdeva, 2023). For some fans, the emotional labour of actively disentangling themselves from a once-cherished cultural object is akin to mourning, a phenomenon analogous to what parasocial research terms 'parasocial grief' or parasocial relationship dissolution, in which audiences experience a profound sense of loss following the perceived severance of a mediated bond (see Tukachinsky-Forster, 2023, pp. 211–213).

This disidentification is uniquely painful in Rowling's case because of the intensity with which many fans once identified with her and her work. This pain is exacerbated by the fact that disengagement from Rowling as a speaker does not entail disengagement from Rowling as a rights-holder, whose influence persists through franchise properties such as *Fantastic Beasts* and *Hogwarts Legacy*, regardless of fan consent or ideological alignment. As Duggan (2021, pp. 153-155) notes, Harry Potter often functioned as a "gateway text" for queer youth, offering metaphors for coming out, community, and transformation. To be disavowed by the author of that text feels, to many, like a second wounding: the loss of a symbolic parent, guide, or avatar. This affective rupture cannot be easily repaired. Instead, it fuels the need to re-inscribe the text with new meaning that is not tethered to its author's ideology, but to the lived experiences of its readers.

Building on earlier forms of reinterpretation, this shift is particularly evident in the proliferation of headcanons, reader-imagined expansions or reinterpretations of canonical elements. While headcanons have always existed in fandom, they have

taken on heightened political and symbolic charge in the Rowling controversy. One common headcanon posits that Severus Snape was a closeted trans man (or, in some iterations, a transgender woman), explaining his complex relationship with gendered authority, appearance, and identity. This interpretation gained notable traction within online fan spaces and inspired events such as “Trans Snape Week” dedicated to celebrating trans readings of the character (Elizabeth, 2017). Another widely circulated reading suggests that Remus Lupin’s lycanthropy serves as an allegory for dysphoria, re-framing his exclusion from teaching roles and romantic relationships as reflective of broader social prejudices (Hidden Hogwarts, 2015). These readings go beyond the text, but they do so in ways that are emotionally resonant, politically informed, and deeply personal.

Crucially, these semiotic interventions are often shared in communal digital spaces, not just as solitary assertions, but as prompts for collective worldbuilding. On Tumblr, fan-run blogs such as *Potter’s Headcanons* encourage users to submit and expand upon reader-imagined reinterpretations, creating multi-threaded discussions that build layered, participatory interpretations of the canon (Potter’s Headcanons, n.d.). On TikTok, creators frequently post videos outlining character headcanons, which are then extended through the platform’s duet feature, allowing others to build performative or narrative responses in real time. Meanwhile, Discord servers like the FlowerPot community host collaborative events such as ‘rewrite circles,’ where participants produce drabbles that reimagine character relationships and core themes of the series centring queerness, care, and affective repair in place of Rowling’s original ideological architecture (FlowerPot Discord, 2024). These practices exemplify the collective authorship described by Lévy, Farley and Lollini (2019, pp. 6-7), in which the boundaries between creator, reader, and critic dissolve into a participatory network of shared meaning.

At the same time, fans are increasingly building entirely new worlds that bear only vestigial resemblance to Rowling’s original. Trans and queer fantasy authors, some of whom got their start writing in Harry Potter fan spaces, are producing original works that carry forward the ethos of inclusivity and transformation while discarding Rowling’s frameworks. For instance, Aiden Thomas, author of *Cemetery Boys*, has acknowledged that their writing journey commenced with Harry Potter fan fiction, which eventually evolved into creating original narratives centred on queer, Latinx characters (Thomas, 2019a). Similarly, Rainbow Rowell’s *Simon Snow* series (2015) originated from her novel *Fangirl*, where she explored fan fiction dynamics; *Carry On* reimagines the “Chosen One” trope with a queer romance at its core, reflecting a conscious departure from traditional frameworks (Rowell, 2015). These works are frequently cited in fan circles as “heirs to Hogwarts” – an evaluative shorthand that describes the relocation of collective attachment and narrative value beyond Rowling’s franchise, consistent with what Duggan (2021, p. 155) describes as affective and political refusal and what De Kosnik (2016, pp. 11-13; 90-92) theorises as fandom’s capacity to re-anchor cultural memory elsewhere. These realignments suggest a

maturing of fandom, not merely as a space of consumption or expression, but as a site of critical consciousness. In resisting Rowling, fans are not simply turning away from one author; they are turning toward a different cultural paradigm. They are reasserting the right to determine which narratives are valuable, which communities are safe, and which futures are worth imagining.

What emerges from this multifaceted resistance is not simply a rejection of Rowling, but a redefinition of authorship itself that has profound implications for how literary authority is conceptualised in the age of participatory media. This redefinition does not involve the passive reception of texts, nor a wholesale erasure of authorial presence. Instead, it marks a shift from singular origin to collective elaboration, from authority to affinity, from text as sacrosanct artefact to text as malleable cultural terrain.

As outlined in my dissertation's theoretical framework, Barthes' (1977, p. 148) provocation that "the Author is dead" finds a particularly vivid realisation in the case of Rowling. Yet this death is no longer metaphorical or purely theoretical. It is enacted, performed, and affirmed by readers who have declared, through their practices, that authorial intent no longer binds interpretive legitimacy. In resisting Rowling, fans do not merely distance themselves from her views but actively construct alternative epistemologies. They establish new interpretive centres in which affect, identity, and community take precedence over textual origin.

Foucault's account of the "author-function" is equally vital here, particularly his insistence that authorship operates as a classificatory mechanism that regulates discourse rather than as a personal source of meaning (Foucault, 1979, p. 23). Rowling's post-2007 paratextual interventions through retroactive declarations, tweets, essays, and interviews were attempts to consolidate and extend this function. She sought to maintain control not just over the narrative, but over the symbolic capital of the world she created. Her failure to do so marks a crisis in the author-function itself. That crisis is not resolved by fan resistance alone, because the author-function here is sustained not only through discourse but through ownership, licensing, and franchise governance, as evidenced by Rowling's continued presence within *Fantastic Beasts* and the commercial ecosystem surrounding *Hogwarts Legacy*. It reveals the limits of institutional authorship in a media ecology already governed by spreadability, participatory culture, and collective intelligence. This process, here understood as a form of *authorial decentralisation*, has profound implications for contemporary cultural politics. It challenges the notion that authors can retroactively moralise their texts. It asserts that representation is not a favour granted from on high, but a necessity generated from below. And it reframes the reader not as a passive vessel but as a co-creator, capable of recoding meaning in ways that reflect shifting social and ethical priorities.

What makes the Rowling case historically and theoretically distinctive is not simply the presence of conflict between author and audience, but the speed and scale with which digital media enabled a radical reconfiguration of authorial identity. Within the

networked environment of social media, Rowling has moved from cultural hero to ideological antagonist to self-positioned victim, reinterpreting her own work in the process as the symbolic inverse of what it once represented. The same narrative universe that had functioned as a progressive allegory of resistance is redeployed to frame inclusion itself as authoritarian overreach, and dissent from Rowling's views as evidence of ideological persecution. This transformation is not merely rhetorical; it reflects the structural conditions of platformed culture, in which visibility, immediacy, and antagonistic feedback loops incentivise moral certainty and polarisation. Never before has an author's ideological repositioning so comprehensively recontextualised their own text against its original ethical logic, recasting the symbolic grammar of resistance as a language of grievance. It is this convergence of digital mediation, authorial persistence, and ideological inversion that lies at the heart of the present chapter, and that renders Rowling's case uniquely instructive for understanding authorship in the age of participatory media.

In the aftermath of J.K. Rowling's controversial statements on sex and gender, a secondary wave of critique has emerged not only targeting the author, but reappraising the Harry Potter books themselves through a distinctly moralistic lens. This process of retroactive critical scrutiny, frequently carried out in progressive online media spaces, reframes the series as more than simply ideologically flawed. It is framed as always-already suspect, its alleged faults overlooked or ignored due to the presumed goodwill of its creator. The aim, implicit or explicit, is to destabilise the cultural legitimacy of the texts by challenging the ethical coherence of their author, creating a discursive environment in which 'good art' becomes inseparable from 'good author.'

While not wholly novel, as similar reappraisals can be found in the cases of Orson Scott Card and Roald Dahl³, this phenomenon appears uniquely intensified by the dynamics of networked participatory culture. Here, ideological response and critical interpretation become inseparable, and content creators' social values are increasingly seen as prerequisites for the continued cultural relevance of their work. As Salter and Stanfill (2020, p. 12) argue, contemporary fan cultures are often invested not simply in the content of texts but in the "para-authorial performance" of their creators. In this context, Rowling's refusal to recant or retreat has not only catalysed moral outrage but functioned as a justification for sweeping reappraisals of her narrative universe, often guided by a logic that seeks to reveal that the author's present ideological flaws were embedded in the text all along.

³ Orson Scott Card and Roald Dahl are introduced here as earlier examples of authors whose public reputations have retrospectively shaped the reception of their works. Card, author of *Ender's Game*, became the subject of organised boycott discourse following his public opposition to same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ rights, particularly in the early 2010s. Dahl, author of widely read children's texts including *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Matilda*, has been subject to renewed critical scrutiny due to documented antisemitic and racist remarks, prompting both public apologies from his estate and debates regarding textual revision. These examples provide a pre-digital or early-digital precedent for the kind of author-text conflation examined in the Rowling case, though the present study argues that such dynamics are intensified and made more visible within contemporary participatory culture.

What results is a form of post hoc meaning-making, in which cultural artefacts are scoured for latent signs of bigotry, exclusion, or regressive politics, whether in the treatment of goblins, house-elves, or the gender binary implicit in the series' metaphysics. Critics and YouTube essayists such as Verity Ritchie (verilybitchie) and Jessie Earl (jessiegender) have produced long-form reassessments that argue, explicitly, for the political and moral necessity of devaluing Harry Potter as a text. The ethical burden is no longer simply Rowling's to bear: the works themselves must be recontextualised or rejected. This movement is not content merely to critique Rowling's politics or even to extricate reader meaning from authorial intent. Instead, it asserts that the books were always compromised, and their popular embrace merely a failure of collective moral and ideological vigilance.

The rise of this trend, particularly within the digital milieu of progressive, long-form video essays and fan activist forums, highlights an intensifying impulse to fuse moral and aesthetic judgement into a single critical act. Rowling's case, by virtue of her extraordinary visibility and symbolic capital, becomes a flashpoint for broader cultural anxieties around the separation (or collapse) of art and artist. The desire to sever cultural legitimacy from a tainted author becomes an exercise in retrospective suspicion, whereby texts once considered inclusive or empowering are now re-narrated as exclusionary, colonialist, or essentialist. As Jenkins (2006, p. 3) and Fiske (1993, p. 12) might both observe in differing terms, such activity represents a form of semiotic resistance. This resistance is no longer limited to the productive re-reading of the text, however. Instead, it becomes an effort to undermine the text's status altogether, stripping it of cultural legitimacy by revoking its claim to ideological virtue.

This impulse to re-read with suspicion is perhaps best understood as a defensive gesture: a reassertion of ethical control over cultural meaning in the face of a perceived betrayal. The initial wave of fan resistance embraced the logic of the "Death of the Author", insisting that Rowling's work could still be enjoyed apart from her personal views. The second wave rejects this distinction entirely, seeking not to separate text from author, but to sever the two. It contends that the author was never truly dead, only sleeping, and that the text, far from being ideologically redeemable, was always an expression of her now-unforgivable worldview. The intent is not merely to reinterpret, but to discredit.

In this context, queer and trans video essayists such as Jessie Earl function not as fringe commentators but as cultural gatekeepers in their own right. This is exemplified in works such as Earl's hour-long breakdown of *The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling* podcast, which foregrounds the moral contradictions of both the author and her work (2020). Their analyses are not marginal fan readings but are increasingly the new critical mainstream. Among the most rhetorically calibrated examples is Shaun's long-form video essay *Harry Potter* (2022), which begins with an analysis of Rowling's transphobic rhetoric but quickly expands into a sustained critique of the books themselves. In a method that deliberately mimics academic neutrality, Shaun adopts a flatly affectless tone, supports all claims with textual evidence, and maintains a

structure that resembles an undergraduate lecture or seminar paper. His critique thus performs objectivity even as it is ideologically charged. For instance, when examining the characterisation of house-elves, Shaun points to how the books “allow their slave status to persist unchallenged within the moral logic of the narrative”, and observes, with studied restraint, that “the system of power is reaffirmed rather than dismantled.” The tone is analytical, the citations frequent, and the rhetorical posture one of dispassionate inquiry, a technique that lends his moral critique a veneer of scholarly authority (Shaun, 2022).

Elsewhere, creators like Quinn Curio (*Uh, Rowling, Why Does Slytherin Still Exist?*) and Lily Simpson (*A Brief Look at Harry Potter*) isolate specific narrative logics as sites of ideological failure. These works question, respectively, the plausibility of Slytherin House’s continued presence despite its overt alignment with fascism, and the flatness of Rowling’s characterisation of evil. Such critiques aim to not just expose inconsistencies, but to reframe the entire Harry Potter universe as a fundamentally flawed imaginative structure, one whose moral simplifications are no longer tenable in light of the author’s contemporary political postures. Even ostensibly comedic or satirical reassessments, such as Hoots’ *Is Harry Potter Bad?* Dr Caelan Conrad’s *Is Harry Potter Original* or Anthony Gramuglia’s *Was Harry Potter Ever Good?* ultimately rest on the same critical gesture. They attempt to sever the text’s cultural capital from its nostalgic affective hold, using the author’s public failures as a lens through which to revise the past.

These developments invite us to revisit Barthes’ (1977, p. 148) provocation that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.” Yet in the context of digital culture, the author does not die so much as return – no longer sovereign, perhaps, but still consequential. As Salter and Stanfill (2020, p. 12) suggest, the “fan auteur” emerges as a paradoxical figure: simultaneously disempowered by fan resistance and recentred through moral contestation. The death of the author gives way not to textual freedom, but to a second life of moral trial. Duggan (2021, pp. 155-157) captures this well, noting that fan fiction and reader response are now used to both resist and indict, enabling queer and trans fans to assert not just alternate interpretations but alternate moral truths. Rowling’s refusal to disappear has made her a metonym for a wider cultural anxiety: that bad people might still write good books, and that those books might have shaped us in ways we now regret.

This retroactive turn is not just about Rowling; it is about the ongoing renegotiation of cultural legitimacy in the age of collective authorship. As outlined earlier in Jenkins, Ford, and Green’s account of spreadability (2013, p. 189), meaning making in a networked culture is governed not only by production but by the circulation and contestation of texts through audience practice. In this sense, the progressive reappraisal of the Harry Potter series represents not simply a backlash, but a new kind of cultural authorship in which fans no longer extend or revise the canon, but render it ideologically obsolete.

Ultimately, this phenomenon underscores the shifting relationship between art, ideology, and identity in a participatory media landscape. The backlash against Rowling's work is not only about what her books say, but about what they represent in the current moral economy of fandom. The text is no longer merely a site of interpretive play; it is a test of political alignment. In this sense, the retroactive invalidation of the Harry Potter series constitutes not merely a rejection of Rowling's politics but a broader renegotiation of cultural value itself: a contest over what stories we keep, who is allowed to tell them, and what we now believe they meant all along.

The interpretive volatility surrounding Harry Potter now extends well beyond its fandom. Once lauded as a liberal fantasy of inclusion, the series has become a focal point of cultural contention. Scholars and critics have increasingly re-evaluated the books not only for their allegorical simplicity but for their embedded ideological assumptions. As Thomas (2019b, pp. 145-154) and Gupta (2009, pp. 168-169) have observed, while the series gestures toward diversity and inclusion, its narrative frameworks often reproduce normative hierarchies and essentialist logics. This broader reassessment reflects a cultural climate in which texts are no longer judged solely on literary merit, but through the lens of ideological coherence and representational ethics. In such a context, the backlash against Rowling's politics has catalysed not only a critique of her paratextual statements, but a redefinition of the Harry Potter books themselves as morally compromised cultural artefacts.

This shift returns us to the theoretical core already established in this chapter: Roland Barthes' (1977) provocation that "the Author is dead" (p. 142). With Rowling's case as our exemplar, we must ask what it means for an author to refuse death, to reassert presence, and to be met not with reverence but resistance. As outlined in Chapter 1, Barthes' intervention displaces authorial intent as the guarantor of meaning, locating interpretation in the destination of the text rather than its origin, and thereby opening meaning to collective readership rather than biographical authority.

Yet if Barthes called for the symbolic death of the author (1977, p.142), Rowling illustrates a very different trajectory: the performative resurrection of the author as an ideological figure. Her refusal to recede from the interpretive field through her digital interventions, moral assertions, and symbolic reframings reveals not the expiration of the author-function, but its transformation. Rowling does not merely speak as an author; she acts as a regulator of meaning, recoding her own canon in public and polemical terms. This return is not explanatory but disciplinary. It is not a clarification of ambiguity, but a foreclosure of dissent. Rowling's framing of herself as a persecuted truth-teller thus operates as a discursive strategy rather than a retreat from authority, exemplifying Fiske's observation that power presents itself as under threat in order to justify its use (1993, p. 12), thus enabling her to claim moral courage while continuing to exercise symbolic and institutional power.

In this, Rowling exemplifies the *author-function* in its most regulatory form, mobilising her authorial identity to organise, police, and legitimise meaning across public

discourse. Rowling's reanimation of her authorial identity through blogs, interviews, tweets, and podcasts constitutes an intensification of this function. She seeks to define not only what her stories mean, but how they ought to be read, and by whom. As we have seen, this attempt has largely failed to consolidate meaning; instead, it has produced interpretive fragmentation, political backlash, and symbolic rupture.

This rupture reveals not the death of the author, but the pluralisation of authorship. Within participatory media culture, meaning is no longer singular or hierarchically delivered, but produced, contested, and recirculated across networks of fan labour, critique, and transformation. In this ecology, the author does not vanish but becomes one voice among many, embedded in a field of interpretive actors whose authority is contingent, relational, and subject to resistance. Rowling's case is not a negation of Barthes' thesis, but its fullest expression in practice: the author lives on, not as sovereign, but as interlocutor and antagonist, or ghost. She persists not as the voice of finality, but as a site of perpetual dispute.

This return to authorship is not unique, but its form is striking. Rowling's reanimation is not nostalgic or celebratory; it is polemical. She does not reappear to offer clarification or expansion. She returns to foreclose meanings, to reject reader interpretations, to assert moral and ideological boundaries. In doing so, she mobilises the author-function in its most regulatory form, exercising authority not through textual mastery but through institutional legitimacy – her brand, her platform, and her capacity to speak and be heard. (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, p. 12; Jenkins, 2006, p. 3).

Yet this reassertion of authorship occurs in an environment fundamentally shaped by participatory culture. Within contemporary media flows, meaning circulates through spreadable, convergent networks in which readers are not passive recipients but active agents who remix, reinterpret, and re-circulate content across multiple platforms. In this environment, the author does not disappear, but they also do not dominate. They become one voice among many, subject to contestation, reinterpretation, and resistance.

In Rowling's case, the digital infrastructure that amplifies her voice is the same infrastructure that enables her readers to resist her authority. Her tweets are archived, dissected, and parodied. Her paratexts are scrutinised alongside fan theories, headcanons, and transformative works. Her moral positions are debated not in scholarly journals alone, but on Tumblr threads, TikTok duets, and Discord servers. Meaning travels not from author to reader in a linear trajectory, but circulates through a network of producers, consumers, critics, and fans.

This circulation is what makes Rowling's attempt to reassert authorial control so paradoxical. She is speaking into a space no longer structured to guarantee the supremacy of her voice. The meaning of Harry Potter is now co-produced, not by intention, but by iterative acts of reading and reinterpretation. Each new fanfic, meme, or reading reshapes the symbolic field. The canon is not fixed, but mutable. The author may speak, but she cannot command.

This does not mean that authorship is irrelevant. It means that authorship has changed. Contemporary authors often occupy a contradictory position, engaging audiences through the same platforms and practices used by fans while simultaneously attempting to retain interpretive authority. They tweet, post, comment, and reply. They curate their image, defend their intent, and sometimes even produce transformative content of their own. But in doing so, they also become part of the participatory economy they once stood above. They are no longer separate from fandom; they are embedded within it.

Rowling, notably, resists this model. She engages the platforms of participatory culture but refuses its interpretive logic. She speaks but does not listen. She posts but does not collaborate. She performs vulnerability but rejects accountability. She seeks to retain hierarchical authority while operating within a communicative environment structured around horizontal participation and contestation. This dissonance is at the heart of the conflict. Rowling wants to be heard without being challenged, followed without being interpreted, revered without being reframed.

This desire for unidirectional authorship is increasingly incompatible with the logic of digital culture. For many readers of Harry Potter, particularly queer and trans readers, engagement with the text is not limited to consumption but extends into lived practice and identification. They reimagine, rewrite, and reinhabit the world of Hogwarts in ways that reflect their identities, politics, and desires. For these readers, the text is not a monument but a mirror, not a doctrine but a dialogue. To be told by the author that their readings are invalid is not simply a disagreement; it is a negation of self. This negation is what fuels the persistence of resistance. Fans do not merely reject Rowling's views; they reject her claim to define the moral universe she created. They kill the author, not with malice, but with multiplicity. They declare that meaning is made in community, not in solitude; in interpretation, not in intention.

What makes this praxis particularly resonant is its emotional dimension. For many readers, resistance to Rowling is not an abstract ideological stance but a response shaped by betrayal, disillusionment, and grief. They are not indifferent to her but remain intimately entangled with her symbolic presence, having once understood her as a figure of imagination, belonging, and moral reassurance. To sever that tie is not an act of cold rationality but a process of affective reckoning. This is evident in fan practices across platforms such as Tumblr, TikTok, and AO3, where creators frequently preface their works with disclaimers that contextualise engagement with Harry Potter as an act of reclamation rather than endorsement. Such gestures do not erase the author but reframe the relationship to the text, affirming that meaning can persist, and be remade, beyond the intentions or authority of its creator.

This is not to suggest that authors no longer matter. On the contrary, the Rowling case demonstrates that authorship remains a potent site of cultural power, but one whose authority is no longer secured by position alone. In a networked and politicised reception environment, authorial influence must be continually negotiated and

legitimised in relation to an active public. The author who refuses to die, then, is not simply preserved or erased, but repositioned: displaced from sovereignty and re-situated within a field of competing interpretations, moral claims, and affective investments. Social media does not abolish the author; it renders authorship unstable, and persistently exposed to challenge.

This chapter has examined the cultural, ideological, and symbolic rupture between J.K. Rowling and her readership, tracing how her increasingly vocal and politicised social media-enabled interventions have redefined the landscape of authorship in contemporary participatory media culture. We began with an understanding of Harry Potter as a global cultural monument, a text whose perceived progressive values of tolerance, resistance, and moral clarity fostered deep identification among readers, particularly queer and trans audiences. That identification, initially supported by Rowling's public persona and post-publication interventions, laid the groundwork for a uniquely affective fan-author bond that would later be tested, strained, and in many cases, broken.

Central to this rupture is Rowling's refusal to relinquish interpretive control over her text. Unlike the absent or retiring author described by Barthes (1977, pp. 146-148), Rowling has reanimated the author-function through a persistent digital presence, platformed political rhetoric, and paratextual reframing. Her actions illustrate a new mode of authorial visibility: the *undead author*, whose refusal to die results not in narrative cohesion, but in contested meaning, backlash, and counter-authorship. Rather than accept the diffusion of interpretive agency typical of participatory culture, Rowling has attempted to reassert centralised control, only to find her authority fractured across networks of resistant readers, transformative creators, and critical fans.

Through the lens of Barthes, Foucault, Jenkins, Duggan, and others, we have seen how Rowling's position as an author is no longer simply a literary role, but a political posture. Her recoding of her own fictional allegories, as exemplified by the symbolic inversion of the Death Eaters, represents a strategic, if deeply problematic, attempt to maintain moral dominance over the cultural field she once appeared to democratise. In positioning herself as the victim of a new progressive orthodoxy, Rowling reframes her own readership as potential ideological enemies, thereby collapsing the line between authorial authority and political antagonism.

Yet this attempted re-centring has not gone unchallenged. Fans whose identities have been delegitimised by Rowling's rhetoric have engaged in a sustained campaign of cultural resistance. Through fan fiction, transformative works, memes, critique, and public statements, they have decoupled the symbolic meaning of Harry Potter from its creator. This is not mere "headcanon" – it is a form of collective epistemic autonomy. Fans have re-authored the world of Hogwarts on their own terms, affirming the death of the author not as a theoretical abstraction, but as a lived practice of survival, reimagination, and resistance.

In doing so, they have articulated a new model of authorship that is plural, affective, and decentralised. Authorship in this paradigm is not a monologic act, but a negotiated process. It unfolds in public, across digital platforms, communal discourses, and creative counter-narratives. Rowling's failure to adapt to this new interpretive economy through her insistence on finality in a culture of fluidity has rendered her increasingly marginal to the meanings her own text continues to generate.

This chapter has therefore not only traced a conflict but has illuminated a structural transformation. The Rowling case exemplifies the ideological and symbolic volatility of authorship in an age of participatory media, identity politics, and networked critique. It shows how an author's refusal to adapt to changing cultural conditions can catalyse not just backlash, but a total reconfiguration of meaning. It demonstrates that in contemporary culture, readers do not just receive texts, but inhabit them, revise them, and ultimately, remake them.

And yet, this phenomenon is not universal. As we head into Chapter 4, we will turn our attention to a contrasting model of authorship: one shaped less by ideological confrontation than by strategic absence. In the case of the *Witcher* franchise, the author of the original literary series, Andrzej Sapkowski, has adopted a markedly different approach to post-publication presence. Unlike Rowling, Sapkowski has remained largely aloof from fan interpretations, adaptations, and cultural disputes. While he has occasionally commented on the video game and television adaptations of his work, his interventions have been sporadic and commercially motivated, rather than ideologically charged.

This authorial detachment has enabled a different kind of cultural dynamic. The *Witcher* universe which spans novels, video games, television series, comics, and fan works, has become a case study in a different kind of interpretive transmedia plurality. Its meanings are not policed by a central authorial voice, but negotiated across media forms, fan communities, and production cultures. Characters like Geralt of Rivia, Yennefer, and Ciri have been reinterpreted in ways that reflect changing cultural values, including feminist, decolonial, and queer readings. In contrast to Rowling's refusal of narrative multiplicity, the *Witcher* invites us to consider the generative possibilities of absent authorship.

Where *Harry Potter* presents a story of contested meaning in the shadow of authorial persistence, the *Witcher* offers a narrative ecology shaped by distributed authorship and open symbolic terrain. Chapter 4 will explore this contrast, asking what is gained and lost when the author disappears and fans of different aspects of the franchise clash with other aspects of the franchise. Does absence allow for greater interpretive freedom, or does it create its own kind of instability? How do fans, producers, and audiences make meaning in the absence of a presiding authorial voice? And what does this tell us about the future of authorship in a media culture increasingly governed not by singular vision, but by collaborative meaning-making?

In bridging these two case studies, we move from the battle over authorial control to the vacuum of its absence. From the spectacle of the undead author to the silence of the author long since gone. In both cases, what remains is the reader – the critic, the fan, the creator – whose work of interpretation continues, reshaping the cultural artefacts of the past into the symbolic futures they demand.

CHAPTER 4 – MARKETS AND MULTIPLICITY: DIFFUSE AUTHORSHIP AND PARTICIPATORY STRUGGLE IN THE WITCHER FRANCHISE

My third case study turns to the Witcher franchise as a means of interrogating how authorship functions in contexts where no single authority, whether creator, fan, adaptor, or corporation, can claim uncontested legitimacy. Where my previous chapters established two contrasting paradigms, with *Game of Thrones* demonstrating the influence of fan theorising within a vacuum of narrative closure, and Harry Potter exemplifying the conflict generated by excessive authorial presence, the Witcher presents a third model. Here, the “author” does not vanish or dominate; instead, authorship fragments across media, genre, industries, and interpretive communities, producing what might be described as a polycentric ecology of competing author-functions.

Taken together, the frameworks developed by Jenkins, Lévy, Fiske, and Salter and Stanfill explain how authorship in the Witcher disperses across a networked cultural ecology. Meaning circulates through convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3), accumulates through collective intelligence (Lévy, 1997, p. 17; Lévy, Farley and Lollini, 2019, p. 6), and is tactically reworked by audiences within a terrain of ideological struggle (Fiske, 1989, p. 14), while institutions increasingly perform authorship as a branded, participatory identity (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, pp. ix-x). Within this ecology, Sapkowski’s literary authority, CDPR’s participatory infrastructures, Netflix’s algorithmic authorship, and fan interventions operate as competing author-functions (Foucault, 1979, p. 19). Authorship thus emerges not as singular or absent, but as polycentric and contested.

As outlined in my theoretical framework, such conditions of dispersed or competing creative authority are understood through concepts developed earlier, including Foucault’s reconceptualisation of the author-function, Barthes’ decentring of primary intent, and the participatory logics of networked culture described by Jenkins and Lévy. Jenkins’ later work with Ford and Green extends these same participatory logics through the concept of spreadability. Unlike earlier models of “stickiness”, which sought to retain audiences within fixed channels, spreadability privileges circulation, shareability, and grassroots recirculation as primary sources of cultural and economic value (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, pp. 1-3). Crucially, however, spreadability as a circulation logic does not imply an egalitarian media environment: Jenkins, Ford and Green emphasise that participation remains uneven, with persistent power asymmetries shaping whose contributions are amplified and whose are marginalised (2013, pp. 189-190). Importantly, the case of the Witcher foregrounds the corporate and emotive dynamics identified by Salter and Stanfill in their account of the fan auteur, as multiple entities, namely the novelist, game studio, streaming platform and occasionally conflicting fan communities, make different kinds of claim to interpretive legitimacy. Rather than restating these frameworks, this chapter traces how they manifest through the often-fluid negotiations between textual authority, commercial

imperatives, and participatory fan interests, producing an unusually visible contest over canonical authenticity and cultural ownership.

As a concrete illustration of these dynamics, CDPR, founded in Warsaw in the 1990s, first gained attention through its localisation of Western roleplaying games (RPGs) for the Polish market. This origin positioned the studio as an intermediary between global gaming culture and Polish players, cultivating an image of authenticity and closeness to its audience (Pitts, 2014). When CDPR acquired the rights to Sapkowski's work in the early 2000s, they did so explicitly as fans of the novels. Promotional material and interviews foregrounded this fannish devotion. Developers described themselves as keepers of Sapkowski's world rather than originators, emphasising respect for the books while also promising to expand them (Badowski quoted in Wilde, 2012).

Ironically, this positioning exemplifies Henry Jenkins' (1992, p. 24) notion of fans as "textual poachers", as outlined in Chapter 1. Where fans appropriate texts and transform them into new cultural productions, CDPR elevated such practices to the level of AAA corporate game development. The Witcher games, particularly *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), can be read as large-scale fan works. While they are derivative in origin, they are ultimately transformative in scope. By presenting themselves as fans first and professionals second, CDPR cultivated trust among global players, contrasting sharply with Sapkowski's aloofness and with Netflix's corporate image. This early positioning as custodians rather than originators would later become central to how CDPR's adaptations were interpreted, trusted, and defended by audiences.

This polycentricity places the Witcher in direct dialogue with Michel Foucault's seminal theorisation of the author-function. As established earlier through Foucault's account of the author-function (1979, p. 130), the "author" operates not as a natural origin but as a classificatory principle organising discourse. In the case of the Witcher, this classificatory principle is not stabilised in a single figure. Andrzej Sapkowski, the franchise's originating novelist, retains authority over the literary source texts but disavows the legitimacy of their transmedia adaptations; CDPR, in developing its best-selling video game franchise, both expanded upon and transformed the world of the Witcher while positioning itself as a fan-approved custodian of the source material; and Netflix, in launching its globally successful adaptation in 2019, mobilised the corporate and algorithmic authority of platform capitalism (referring to the organisation of cultural production through digital platforms driven by data, visibility, and algorithmic circulation) to mediate the restructuring of the narrative for global markets. Fans, critics, industry discourse, and the creators themselves, consistently debate which of these entities holds the right to define "canon", a debate in which claims to authorship are increasingly conflated with claims to canonical authority, demonstrating the contested and unstable nature of authorship in convergent culture.

To appreciate the distinctiveness of this case, it is necessary to recall the dynamics outlined in Chapters 1 and 2. In the *Game of Thrones* case, the absence of completed

novels created what I characterised as a vacuum of authorial authority, allowing fan speculation, as exemplified by the ubiquitous “Cleganebowl” theory, to enter adaptation practice, with the showrunners seemingly acquiescing to fan demand despite limited textual justification (Windolf, 2014; Hibberd, 2019a). Conversely, the Harry Potter case traced how J.K. Rowling’s persistent interventions through social media, interviews, and her own digital platforms reasserted authorial control long after the publication of the novels, culminating in ideological conflict with her LGBTQ+ fanbase (Duggan, 2021, pp. 160-162; Salter and Stanfill, 2020, pp. 24-26). These contrasting dynamics of absence versus over-presence illustrate the extremes of contemporary authorial positioning within participatory digital culture.

The Witcher, by contrast, defies the extremes of absence and excess, instead embodying dispersion. Sapkowski’s refusal to engage substantively with the adaptations and his insistence on the novels as the sole canon (Wilde, 2012) co-exist with CDPR’s creative elaborations in the games, widely accepted by fans as authentic expansions of the Witcher universe (Jański, 2019, p. 119), and with Netflix’s attempts to globalise and diversify the franchise, albeit with significant fan backlash (Nakamura, 2018). Rather than stabilising meaning, this multiplicity produces ongoing contestation across interpretive communities: novel purists, game loyalists, show-only audiences, and cross-platform fans frequently clash in online forums about what constitutes the “real” Witcher. In this sense, the case illustrates what Jenkins (2006, p. 3) terms convergence culture, “where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” ...but in a form even more radically decentralised than the other cases under consideration.

This analysis also allows for a revisitation of Roland Barthes’ provocation concerning the “Death of the Author”. As outlined earlier, Barthes’ contention displaces authorial intent as the guarantor of meaning, locating interpretation within the field of readership rather than origin (1977, p. 146). While Barthes sought to liberate the reader from the tyranny of the author, contemporary participatory culture complicates this picture. In *Game of Thrones*, the “death” of Martin’s authorial presence enabled fan theories to proliferate unchecked, shaping adaptation. In Harry Potter, the author’s refusal to “die” led to conflict over meaning. In the Witcher, however, the situation is not that the author dies but that authorship proliferates: Sapkowski, CDPR, Netflix, and multiple fan constituencies each claim interpretive legitimacy. In this regard, Barthes’ metaphor requires updating – in digital culture, authors do not die but multiply, generating what might be called a dispersed or networked author-function.

The dispersal of authorial authority observable in the Witcher is not a trivial by-product of transmedia expansion but a phenomenon that foregrounds several theoretical imperatives for media and cultural studies. Following Foucault’s account of the author-function as previously established, authorship can be conceptualised as a classificatory construct rather than a natural point of origin. The Witcher, however, suggests that in contemporary media culture, this function may be radically multiplied

and distributed across industrial, fan, and paratextual domains in ways that destabilise traditional boundaries between producers and audiences. This renders the Witcher franchise an exemplary case for rethinking the operation of authorship in an era defined by convergence and participatory culture.

Henry Jenkins' foundational work on participatory culture (1992, p. 24; 2006, p. 2) anticipated this blurring of boundaries. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins (1992, p. 24) characterised fans as "active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings", resisting the stereotype of the passive consumer. By the time of *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins (2006, p. 2) described a "new participatory folk culture" in which "the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways". The Witcher case provides a particularly vivid demonstration of this dynamic, insofar as Sapkowski, CDPR, and Netflix are all compelled to engage, directly or indirectly, with audiences who assert interpretive authority through practices of critique, modding, transformative fiction, and online debate. The presence of multiple competing centres of authorial legitimacy amplifies what Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, pp. 189-190) later describe as the 'unevenness' of spreadable media: while audiences exercise agency in circulating and reshaping content, industrial actors continue to exert asymmetrical influence. Accordingly, this chapter proceeds by first examining Sapkowski's contested claims to literary authority, then analysing CDPR's fan-aligned custodianship through game adaptation, before turning to Netflix's platform-driven reconfiguration of the franchise and the fan conflicts it provokes, read against the earlier literary and game-based claims to authority.

Pierre Lévy, Farley and Lollini's (2019, p. 7) concept of collective intelligence deepens this frame by offering an epistemological model for understanding how fan communities collaboratively generate and contest knowledge. For Lévy, digital communication enables a "stigmergic" form of interaction, in which meaning is continually modified by individuals contributing to a shared cultural memory (Lévy, Farley and Lollini, 2019, pp. 6-7). Applied to the Witcher, this explains why fan debates over canonicity, modded expansions of CDPR's games, and even the circulation of memes about Netflix's casting choices do not constitute isolated interventions but are all components of an evolving collective negotiation of the franchise's meaning. In this sense, the Witcher illustrates the extent to which collective intelligence reshapes the author-text-reader relationship: authorship is no longer the prerogative of Sapkowski or any one industrial body, but the emergent property of networked communities interacting with and against corporate narratives.

This dispersion also recalls John Fiske's (1993, p. 14) emphasis on popular culture as "a site of struggle, a terrain of tactical resistance" in which audiences appropriate and reconfigure texts. Fans of the Witcher exemplify this tactical engagement by aligning themselves with different interpretive centres, some invoking Sapkowski's novels as a measure of authenticity, others championing CDPR's elaborations as more definitive, and still others embracing Netflix's globalised reinterpretation. The circulation of these contestations demonstrates Fiske's claim that popular culture thrives on semiotic

productivity, where audiences generate meanings that may directly oppose those privileged by industrial authorities. What is distinctive in the *Witcher* case is the absence of a singular hegemonic voice: instead of resistance against a clearly dominant author, fans operate within a fragmented field of competing claims, heightening the visibility of these tactical negotiations as fans publicly align with, contest, or reject competing claims to authorial and canonical legitimacy.

Finally, the role of corporate branding and the construction of authorial identity must be acknowledged. As Salter and Stanfill (2020, pp. ix-x) argue in *A Portrait of the Auteur as Fanboy*, contemporary transmedia franchises increasingly rely on the branding of creators as both “one of us” and “one of them”: figures whose legitimacy derives from being both fan and professional. As will be substantiated below through industrial discourse and paratextual positioning, CDPR epitomises this strategy, branding itself as a fan-approved custodian of the *Witcher* while simultaneously operating as an AAA studio beholden to corporate imperatives. Netflix likewise mobilises the authority of the showrunner, Lauren Schmidt Hissrich, as a paratextual guarantor of quality while embedding her role within an algorithm-driven industrial logic. The author-function here is not only dispersed but also commodified, transformed into a branding device that secures affective value across a contested franchise, a process theorised in work on paratexts and media branding (Gray, 2010, pp. 127, 136; Gray and Johnson, 2013, pp. 2-4).

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives illuminate the stakes of the *Witcher*’s case. If my analysis of *Game of Thrones* demonstrates how fandom can intervene when the author is absent, and my examination of *Harry Potter* reveals how fandom resists when the author is over-present, then the *Witcher* demonstrates that authorship itself may become radically pluralised, an ongoing negotiation between multiple institutional, individual, and collective actors. This insight challenges the adequacy of Barthes’ “Death of the Author” thesis, a problem that this chapter explores by tracing how authorship proliferates rather than disappears in networked, transmedia culture.

Any discussion of the *Witcher*’s fractured authorship must begin with Andrzej Sapkowski himself. Sapkowski is the sole literary originator of the *Witcher* universe, having published the first short story, “Wiedźmin” (“The Witcher”), in the Polish fantasy magazine *Fantastyka* in 1986 (Walewski, 2026). His subsequent novels and short story collections, often referred to as the “Saga”, constitute the ur-text from which all later adaptations derive. Despite this, Sapkowski has consistently positioned himself in ways that resist the role of the “founding author” – that is, the figure imagined in Romantic and post-Romantic literary traditions as the originating, sovereign source of meaning whose authority persists beyond the text and across its subsequent iterations.

Unlike J.K. Rowling, who actively courts media attention and strategically extends her authorship into digital spaces, or George R.R. Martin, who is embedded in both the fandom and the production apparatus of his adaptations, Sapkowski has cultivated an

image of the reluctant, even disdainful creator. His interviews repeatedly foreground a refusal to embrace the participatory, transmedia, and fan-driven logics that have come to define contemporary cultural production. In one of his most cited remarks, Sapkowski quipped: “I have no time for this, and it’s not entertainment for me” when asked whether he had played the CDPR games (Wolens, 2023). The comment, often repeated across fan and industry discourse, functions as a kind of anti-fandom statement, deliberately distancing himself from the participatory convergence culture that Jenkins (2006, p. 3) identifies as central to modern franchises.

Sapkowski’s posture goes beyond personal preference. He has been explicit in his rejection of the legitimacy of transmedia expansions of his work. When the CDPR games achieved international acclaim and sold tens of millions of copies (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* alone surpassed 50 million units worldwide by the end of 2023, (CD Projekt Group, n.d., p. 6)), Sapkowski insisted that the novels remain the only “canonical” Witcher. Sapkowski asserts the autonomy and superiority of his literary original over its adaptations, stating that “the original stands alone, and every adaptation stands alone; you can’t translate words into images without losing something...” (Sapkowski, 2025). Such comments underscore his refusal to concede interpretive legitimacy to adaptations, positioning himself as the sole arbiter of the Witcher universe and implicitly rejecting the poststructuralist displacement of meaning from authorial origin to readership articulated by Barthes.

This insistence places Sapkowski in stark contrast to the logic of transmedia storytelling articulated by Jenkins (2006, p. 95), who argues that successful transmedia franchises “unfold across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole”. Sapkowski’s refusal to recognise these contributions does not prevent fans or industry actors from treating them as legitimate, but it highlights the author’s anti-transmedia stance. His posture embodies what Salter and Stanfill (2020, p. 44) describe as the “reluctant auteur”, one who is branded by the industry and audiences as central, but who actively disavows that position.

This tension crystallised in the 2018 legal dispute between Sapkowski and CDPR, a conflict that unfolded within the rapid expansion of the Witcher as a global, multi-platform franchise. Having originally sold the adaptation rights to the Witcher for a very modest lump sum, reportedly due to his disbelief in the financial viability of video games, Sapkowski later demanded additional royalties after the games’ extraordinary commercial success. In a statement, he claimed entitlement to further compensation “well beyond the amount initially received” (CD Projekt Group, 2018). The dispute was eventually settled, with the CD Projekt group agreeing to a new settlement that “satisfies and fully clarifies the requirements and expectations of both parties” (CD Projekt Group, 2019).

While primarily a contractual matter, the dispute exemplifies the contested terrain of authorship under contemporary franchise capitalism. Sapkowski’s claim rested not

merely on financial grounds but on a symbolic assertion of primacy: as the original creator, he argued, he should benefit proportionally from the franchise's success. Yet, this assertion sits uneasily within a neoliberal consumer culture in which franchises proliferate precisely through adaptation, expansion, and the circulation of consumable spin-offs across media markets. By selling the rights outright and dismissing the games' cultural value, Sapkowski simultaneously disavowed the industrial logic that enabled the franchise's global reach while seeking retroactive compensation from it. This episode illustrates Foucault's (1979, p. 19) insight that the author-function is not reducible to biological authorship but operates through institutional, legal, and discursive mechanisms that redistribute creative authority.

If Sapkowski's public persona positions him as sceptical of adaptation and dismissive of participatory culture, his literary style reinforces this resistance. Critics often note that Sapkowski's prose is marked by folkloric allusion and ironic inversion, qualities that resist transparent worldbuilding (Gawroński and Bajorek, 2020 pp. 6-7; Majkowski, 2018, p. 4). These strategies operate as a performance of authorial control, demanding interpretive labour from readers and implicitly resisting transnational translation. The following comparative analyses of CDPR's video games and Netflix's adaptation demonstrates how these stylistic features are variously preserved, hybridised, or universalised, and how Sapkowski's use of Slavic folklore becomes a battleground in the struggle over interpretive authority and canon formation.

Sapkowski's world is built on Slavic folklore and fairy tale subversions that resist transparent worldbuilding by embedding cultural specificity and moral ambiguity into their narrative foundations. These stylistic strategies demand interpretive labour from readers and implicitly resist universalisation, positioning meaning as unstable and culturally situated rather than systematised or encyclopaedic. As the *Witcher* circulates across media, however, these same features become sites of simplification or erasure, revealing how adaptation transforms not only narrative content but the distribution of interpretive authority itself.

This tension is particularly visible in Sapkowski's treatment of folkloric monstrosity. His monsters are not generic fantasy creatures, but culturally specific allegories rooted in Eastern European folklore. In "The Last Wish", the striga is not merely a supernatural antagonist but the product of incest between King Foltest and his sister, a curse that operates as a pointed manifestation of aristocratic corruption and generational sin. Drawing on Polish legends of vampiric children and monstrous births, the striga's horror lies not only in her physical transformation but in what she symbolises: taboo-breaking sexuality and the moral rot of hereditary power (Sapkowski, 2008, pp. 5-22). The folkloric parable resists abstraction, insisting on a culturally embedded logic that cannot be disentangled from its social critique.

In *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red, 2007) much of the striga's backstory is preserved. Through cinematic cutscenes, dialogue, and bestiary entries, players are told of the incestuous curse and its tragic consequences. Crucially, however, the game allows

players to choose whether to lift the curse or kill the striga. The folkloric parable is thus translated into an interactive moral-choice system, consistent with RPG conventions. While the cultural specificity of the incestuous curse survives, it is reframed as a globally legible gameplay mechanic centred on choosing “the lesser evil”. Folklore here becomes portable, rendered transferable across cultural boundaries through player agency rather than symbolic resonance.

In the Netflix Season 1 episode, “Betrayal Moon”, the striga is staged primarily as an antagonist in a horror-action set piece. Although the incestuous curse is mentioned, it is largely sidelined in favour of emphasising Geralt’s combat skills and his empathy in sparing the creature. The parable of dynastic sin collapses into a character-defining episode for Geralt, reframing a culturally specific tale as a universal test of the monster hunter’s compassion. What is lost is not narrative coherence but the density of symbolic meaning that anchors the monster to a particular cultural and moral tradition (Netflix, 2019).

A similar pattern emerges in Sapkowski’s use of rusalki, figures drawn from Slavic folklore as drowned women who haunt rivers and lakes, simultaneously erotic and lethal. In Sapkowski’s short stories, rusalki evoke cultural anxieties surrounding sexuality, gendered violence, and death, situating the Witcher firmly within an Eastern European mythic landscape in which monstrosity is inseparable from social transgression. These figures resist categorisation, functioning less as enemies to be defeated than as manifestations of unresolved cultural trauma.

While rusalki are not explicitly named in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, their traits survive in creatures such as water hags and drowners. Bestiary entries preserve a trace of their folkloric genealogy, but they are repositioned as ecological monster-types within a systematised taxonomy. The erotic and tragic undertones of the rusalka myth are largely absent, replaced by a functional logic oriented toward combat, loot, and environmental danger. The myth becomes a species classification, useful for gameplay rather than cultural reflection (CD Projekt Red, 2015).

Netflix’s second season continues this process of abstraction. Water-based monsters appear as CGI spectacle, stripped of cultural or gendered specificity. Folklore functions only as aesthetic texture, disconnected from its Slavic origins and rendered interchangeable with other fantasy iconography. In this version, monstrosity is visual rather than symbolic, reinforcing a mode of storytelling that privileges accessibility and recognisability over interpretive depth (Netflix, 2021).

Sapkowski’s resistance to transparent worldbuilding is equally evident in his treatment of fairy-tale inversion. “A Grain of Truth” reworks *Beauty and the Beast* by centring on Nivellen, a cursed noble whose transformation is punishment for rape rather than a tragic misunderstanding. Although the narrative retains the formal structure of fairy-tale resolution, the curse is lifted not through repentance or moral reform but as an unintended consequence of Vereena’s violent death. Vereena, a bruxa who genuinely loves Nivellen while simultaneously preying on travellers, collapses the moral clarity

of the source tale: love neither redeems the guilty nor civilises the monstrous. Geralt's decision to escort Nivellen away rather than condemn him introduces a form of conditional, personal forgiveness that operates outside both fairy-tale justice and moral restitution, preserving narrative closure while withholding ethical resolution and forcing readers to confront the disjunction between narrative form and moral justice (Sapkowski, 2008, pp. 27-44).

Echoes of this inversion appear in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* through quests that rework folkloric and fairy-tale motifs into branching ethical dilemmas. In "A Towerful of Mice", Geralt confronts a cursed lover whose tragic narrative may itself be deceptive, with the quest's moral meaning emerging only through player investigation and choice. Similarly, "The Whispering Hillock" forces players to choose between mutually destructive outcomes, translating fairy-tale moral ambiguity into procedural consequence. In these and related quests, irony is not sustained as critique but redistributed across decision-trees, where no outcome fully resolves the underlying injustice. What in Sapkowski functions as corrosive irony becomes, in the game, a system of choice that prioritises player agency over narrative judgement, diffusing satirical force into a flexible moral economy compatible with RPG design (CD Projekt Red, 2015).

Netflix's adaptation of "A Grain of Truth" significantly muddies the fairy-tale logic that gives Sapkowski's story its stark ethical force. Rather than isolating the encounter as a self-contained parable, the episode embeds Nivellen and Vereena's narrative within the broader historical and political aftermath of the Battle of Sodden Hill, repeatedly cutting away to parallel plotlines involving Triss, Yennefer, Tissaia, Fringilla, and Nilfgaard. This serial structure dilutes the story's allegorical clarity, reframing it as one thread among many in an unfolding epic rather than a concentrated moral inversion. The episode further intensifies horror through the addition of an abandoned village, mutilated bodies, and extended combat spectacle, shifting the tone from tragic irony toward Gothic excess. Nivellen's culpability is expanded rather than focused: he remains guilty of rape and temple desecration, is revealed to be an old acquaintance of Geralt (providing Geralt additional motivation to withhold judgment over him) and is knowingly complicit in Vereena's murders, while Vereena herself oscillates between lover, predator, and moral interlocutor who warns Ciri that Geralt will inevitably come for her too. Vereena's death, staged as a climactic confrontation, transforms the fairy-tale mechanism of redemption into narrative payoff. In overcomplicating motivation, guilt, and narrative context, the adaptation loses the brutal simplicity of Sapkowski's subversion, replacing its tragic precision with a congested moral field shaped by the demands of serialised prestige fantasy (Netflix, 2021).

All told, these examples demonstrate how Sapkowski's stylistic reliance on culturally specific folklore, irony, and moral ambiguity systematically resists adaptive closure. As the *Witcher* moves across media, these features are not simply altered but re-functioned in ways that redistribute interpretive authority away from the originating text and toward participatory and market-driven logics. Folklore thus becomes a key site

in the struggle over canon and authorship, illustrating how adaptation transforms not only stories but the power structures that govern their meaning.

A further challenge posed by Sapkowski's prose lies in his use of metafictional framing, which functions not only as a stylistic device but also as a form of structural resistance to narrative closure and, by extension, to the adaptive simplification demanded by transmedia expansion. Within the *Witcher* tales themselves events are frequently narrated by chroniclers, bards, or pseudo-historians who situate events at a remove, reminding the reader that narrative authority is frequently mediated, rather than being presented directly. For example, Dandelion (Jaskier) often serves not merely as Geralt's companion but as a narrative voice, inserting songs, commentary, and retellings of events that foreground the process of storytelling. Similarly, interpolated pseudo-historical notes in the *Saga* highlight the unreliability of recorded history, undercutting the authority of any single version of events.

These strategies transform the *saga* into a story about stories, compelling readers to reflect on the instability of narrative authority. Through its layered narration, unstable framing, and refusal of authoritative consolidation, Sapkowski's prose resists this pressure. To understand how his anti-transmedia posture is mirrored in his writing, it is necessary to turn to the structure and style of the novels themselves as sites of resistance to adaptive consolidation.

The opening story cycle, *The Last Wish* (2008), exemplifies this posture. Its frame narrative, involving Geralt recovering in a temple while the priestess Nenneke listens to his recollections, positions the reader at a remove from events, relying on Geralt's subjective account. From the start, then, the *Witcher* universe is mediated, presented as a series of narrated memories, anecdotes, and retellings. As Foucault reminds us, the "author-function" is less a person than a principle of classification, a way of stabilising discourse through the figure of the author (1979, p. 29). Sapkowski appears to resist even this stabilisation: his narrative strategy produces multiple competing versions of events, each embedded in oral storytelling traditions, gossip, and folklore. For instance, the story "The Witcher" embeds the striga contract in Velerad's conversational recounting, which is explicitly assembled from report, rumour, and retrospect, before Geralt's confrontation, deliberately confusing whether the curse will be broken, and whether his actions are mercenary or compassionate (Sapkowski, 2008, pp. 7-11). Rather than authorial fiat, the reader is left to negotiate competing possibilities.

This ambiguity is even more pronounced in *Sword of Destiny* (2015), where Sapkowski introduces Ciri. The story "Something More" relies on prophecy and vision, constantly deferring certainty about Ciri's destiny. The narration is intercut with dream sequences and unreliable perspectives. Sapkowski refuses to consolidate his narrative into a single coherent truth, instead layering fate, chance, irony, and "Destiny" with a capital D. In authorial terms, this is a refusal to act as sole guarantor of meaning, an irony made sharper by Sapkowski's later insistence that 'the books alone are canon'. Here,

Salter and Stanfill's notion of the "reluctant auteur" is illuminating: an author who paradoxically asserts centrality ("the books alone are canon") while producing texts whose very structure destabilises centralised control (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, p.xii).

The culmination of this technique is visible in *The Lady of the Lake* (2017). The novel employs a complex metafictional frame in which Ciri, trapped between worlds, recounts her story to Sir Galahad, while parallel narratives describe elven worlds, Arthurian myth, and intertextual references to *The Song of Roland* and Polish folklore. The result is a text that resists closure: Geralt and Yennefer's apparent resurrection at the end is conveyed in terms of vision and allegory, rather than factual certainty. Sapkowski closes his saga with ambiguity, ensuring that even at the "end", the Witcher universe is open to contestation. This refusal of closure exemplifies what John Fiske calls "producerly" texts: works that invite audiences to engage in semiotic struggle, appropriating and reinterpreting gaps (Fiske, 1989, p. 104). Paradoxically, by producing a narrative riddled with indeterminacy, Sapkowski creates precisely the conditions that enable later interpretive expansion – conditions that CDPR and Netflix subsequently exploit, despite his resistance to their claims.

This structural refusal of closure resonates with Sapkowski's paratextual posture. In interviews, he consistently downplays the idea that the Witcher saga functions as meticulously planned world-building, noting in his recent Reddit AMA that adaptive elements like witcher schools emerged from incidental lines he later deemed narratively incorrect and are not part of his intended lore (Sapkowski, 2025). In the same AMA, when asked about the relationship between his novels and their screen and game adaptations, Sapkowski stated unequivocally that "there are no dependencies or points of convergence between the literary original and its adaptation... The original stands alone, and every adaptation stands alone" (Sapkowski, 2025). Rather than positioning himself as overseer of a unified franchise universe, he frames each medium as structurally autonomous.

His responses to questions about background detail further reinforce this stance. Addressing inquiries about elements absent from the novels, he remarked that "if something isn't there, it's for two reasons: a. the reader doesn't need that information... b. the author intends for that information to remain a secret" (Sapkowski, 2025). Absence, in this formulation, is not oversight but design. The text is not an incomplete database awaiting supplementation, but a finished literary artefact governed by narrative economy. As he puts it elsewhere in the same discussion, "the plot is the queen; it decides who appears in the book" (Sapkowski, 2025). Worldbuilding, genealogical elaboration, and encyclopaedic coherence are thus subordinated to story logic rather than treated as transmedia infrastructure.

Together, these comments affirm that Sapkowski refuses to operate as anything like a "world manager", preferring to be read as a literary author rather than a custodian of comprehensive lore. Derek Johnson and Jonathan Gray argue that industrial transmedia often positions the author as guarantor of "quality, coherence, and style"

across franchises (2013, p. 3). Sapkowski explicitly rejects this role, asserting literary authority only within his novels while refusing accountability for coherence beyond them – a stance that places him at odds with industrial expectations of franchise authorship.

This anti-authorial posture can be understood as a form of resistance against what Salter and Stanfill identify as the “auteur-branding” of contemporary franchise creators (2020, p.xiii). Whereas Rowling has embraced her position as “the auteur who lived” (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, p. 39), and Martin has retreated into silence, Sapkowski embodies a third trajectory: active disdain. He performs authorship as withdrawal, refusing the labour of paratextual coherence that the media industries now demand. Paradoxically, however, this very withdrawal sharpens his symbolic authority for certain factions of the fandom, especially ‘novel purists’ who deploy his disdain as ammunition against Netflix and CDPR expansions. This dynamic, particularly visible in online ‘novel purist’ communities, will be examined in detail in the following section, where fan discourse surrounding CDPR and Netflix adaptations is analysed directly. Thus, Sapkowski becomes a reluctant node in Foucault’s dispersed author-function: invoked precisely because of his refusal.

One illustrative example is the fan discourse around Ciri. In Sapkowski’s novels, Ciri is a traumatised, liminal figure, oscillating between multiple roles: child of destiny, apprentice witcher, traumatised survivor, and finally mythic avatar of cyclical history. Her story resists stabilisation: even her fate with Geralt and Yennefer is left as rumour. CDPR’s *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, by contrast, offers players the chance to decide Ciri’s destiny as empress, witcher, or corpse. Netflix repositions her as a conventional protagonist, foregrounding her training arc and trauma in ways that seek coherence. Fans debate which “Ciri” is authentic, frequently invoking Sapkowski’s authority when it suits their factional preference, particularly in online discussions surrounding adaptation fidelity and canon legitimacy (see Reddit threads archived on r/wiedzmin and r/witcher; cf. Hinsliff, 2002, pp. 47-49). Yet the irony is that Sapkowski’s Ciri is precisely *not* coherent: her multiplicity resists authorial closure. In this sense, fans misidentify Sapkowski as a stabilising force when his actual textual practice is destabilisation.

This contradiction makes Sapkowski a textbook case of Fiske’s semiotic struggle. Fans appropriate his disdain as a weapon in discursive battles, positioning themselves as guardians of “true” canon against industrial adaptations, even though Sapkowski himself undermines canon through metafictional play. This reflects what Jenkins called “textual poaching”, as fans seize the text’s gaps and indeterminacies for their own creative purposes (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23). Yet in the Witcher’s case, the poaching is intensified by Sapkowski’s refusal to supply definitive authorial rulings. His silence or, indeed, hostility becomes part of the poaching terrain.

In this manner, Sapkowski’s prose and persona instantiate the paradox of the “reluctant auteur”. He claims authority despite writing texts that destabilise authority.

In this light, Sapkowski's posture is less eccentric than it is symptomatic of authorship under networked, convergent media conditions. Crucially, this is not just resistance to narrative closure of the kind found in many modernist or postmodern works; rather, Sapkowski simultaneously asserts canonical finality at the level of authorship while structurally denying closure within the narrative world itself. He dismisses transmedia adaptation while inadvertently fuelling it through ambiguity. His readers, adaptors, and detractors all validate his refusal to assert their own claims, demonstrating Foucault's point that authorship is not a sovereign origin but a function of discursive classification. Sapkowski's "anti-authorial" stance does not erase the author but fragments him, producing what we might call a negative author-function: authority wielded precisely through absence, disdain, and refusal.

As Jenkins, Ford and Green argue in *Spreadable Media*, content circulates in ways that exceed corporate or authorial control; what matters is how audiences frame and mobilise texts (2013, pp. 2-4). Sapkowski's disdain does not prevent this circulation, it enhances it, giving fans discursive leverage against adaptations they dislike. Thus, his authorial withdrawal guarantees his ongoing centrality. He remains indispensable, precisely because he refuses to be. Fans frequently affirm this refusal as a mark of authenticity, using it to police boundaries of canon within the Witcher fandom, particularly in debates contrasting 'authorial intent' with adaptation legitimacy (Gray, 2010, pp. 136-140; Booth, 2010, pp. 117-119).

Adaptations respond to this difficulty differently. CDPR integrates Sapkowski's metafictional instability into gameplay through bestiary entries, codices, and multiple quest outcomes. A contract on a monster, for instance, might include contradictory testimonies from villagers, forcing players to sort through partial perspectives in pursuit of the "truth". This approach shifts interpretive uncertainty into the domain of player choice, asking players to navigate conflicting perspectives and partial information through decision-making rather than narration. Netflix, on the other hand, streamlines metafictional frames into linear exposition. Jaskier is retained as a comic foil and expository companion but largely stripped of his metafictional function, serving instead to inject humour or advance plot. Thus, the metafictional density that resists stable interpretation in the novels is flattened into either interactive mechanics (CDPR) or televisual character beats (Netflix).

Beyond questions of authority and adaptation structure, Sapkowski's resistance to stabilisation is also enacted stylistically, through irony and dense intertextual play, often parodying canonical fairy tales. As stated previously, "A Grain of Truth" rewrites *Beauty and the Beast* as a critique of patriarchal romance: the "beast" is revealed as a rapist, cursed for his crimes rather than ennobled by love. "The Lesser Evil" undermines the heroic quest by forcing Geralt to choose between equally compromised options, illustrating a moral world structured by ambiguity rather than binary oppositions (Sapkowski, 2008). These strategies resist the consolations of conventional fantasy, understood here as narratives that resolve moral conflict through stable heroic arcs, positioning Sapkowski's work closer to postmodern pastiche and

critical parody than to straightforward epic fantasy (Attebery, 2008, pp. 17-18, 36-37; Mendlesohn, 2012, p. 284).

For adaptations, however, irony and intertextuality present obstacles. These obstacles arise because irony depends on cultural context and readerly inference, while intertextual parody presumes shared folkloric knowledge that is difficult to render legible within mass, transnational media formats. CDPR translates them into branching moral dilemmas, where player choice becomes the medium of interpretive ambiguity. Rather than reproducing unreliable narration directly, this process relocates narrative indeterminacy into a structured interactive form that, for many players, ultimately resolves into a single, concrete outcome within a closed system of predefined possibilities. While this preserves the sense of moral greyness, it recasts irony as a gameplay mechanic. Netflix softens irony into tragedy: its version of “A Grain of Truth” transforms a biting critique of patriarchal fantasy into a universalised tale of loneliness and empathy, aligning Geralt with familiar, emotionally legible fantasy hero conventions (Mittell, 2015, pp. 50, 249-250; Buonanno, 2008, pp. 71-75, 106-109). What in Sapkowski functions as interpretive friction is reworked as accessible drama.

Taken together, the stylistic features of folkloric specificity, metafictional framing, and ironic inversion constitute what can be described as a performance of authorial control. By embedding his narratives in culturally specific folklore, Sapkowski ensures that any adaptation must either translate or strip away their cultural density. By using metafictional devices, he destabilises narrative authority in ways difficult to reproduce on screen or in gameplay. By parodying fairy tales, he forces readers into interpretive labour, resisting simple moral or narrative closure.

These strategies align with Sapkowski’s public statements regarding adaptation rights and his 2018-2019 contractual dispute with CDPR. His insistence that the novels are the sole canonical *Witcher* is not merely rhetorical but reinforced by the narrative architecture of his texts. Where CDPR hybridises folklore with RPG mechanics and Netflix universalises motifs for global audiences, Sapkowski’s prose insists on cultural specificity, opacity, and interpretive complexity. In this sense, his style operates as an anti-adaptive strategy: a way of consolidating his authority by making his texts resistant to transmedia simplification.

Barthes (1977, p. 146) argued that “a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures”, suggesting that intertextuality undermines authorial authority. Sapkowski, however, mobilises intertextuality and folklore not to disperse meaning but to consolidate it. His novels demonstrate that intertextuality can function as an assertion of authorship within a transmedia framework, where cultural specificity limits adaptive equivalence across media. By embedding meaning in culturally specific forms, he implicitly privileges himself as the necessary interpreter. Adaptations may circulate globally, but they do so under the shadow of Sapkowski’s textual primacy.

If Sapkowski embodies the reluctant, anti-transmedia author, CDPR occupies the opposite position by assuming the role of the “fan auteur”. As discussed earlier in this

chapter, Salter and Stanfill's (2020, p. ix) "fan auteur" describes a creator-position that trades on simultaneous insider-fan identification and professional authority. CDPR have consistently branded themselves in precisely this manner. As established earlier in the chapter, CDPR's self-positioning as fannish intermediaries rather than originators shaped how their adaptations were received and trusted by audiences.

Importantly, this self-branding aligns with Jenkins, Ford and Green's (2013, pp. 189-190) observations about spreadable media. CDPR did not simply produce a closed narrative product; they built infrastructure, such as the DRM-free distribution platform GOG.com and REDkit, which allowed for extensive modding support. Naturally, this infrastructure proceeded to facilitate participatory culture around their games. This move positioned them as not only authors but facilitators of fan authorship, effectively enshrining their "fan auteur" identity.

While Sapkowski insisted that his novels alone constitute the *Witcher* canon, CDPR transformed the universe into a living, explorable world that both expanded upon and reconfigured the source material. *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) is particularly instructive. It not only adapts elements of the Saga but develops original storylines, characters, and worldbuilding on a scale that eclipses the novels in terms of breadth and accessibility, as can be illustrated by the following examples.

My first example addresses the way the foundational principle of player agency in gaming concretises much of the postmodern ambiguity in Sapkowski's writing. One of Sapkowski's most consequential authorial manoeuvres is to leave the *status* of Geralt and Yennefer's bond formally ambiguous. In "The Last Wish", Geralt's desperate wish to a djinn, made to save Yennefer, binds the couple together in ways neither fully comprehends; the text pointedly refuses to definitively assert whether the love that follows is fated compulsion or authentic affection (Sapkowski, 2008, pp. 129-161). This uncertainty is not just a plot puzzle or narrative beat; it is a structural ambiguity that underwrites the pair's long arc, generating precisely the sort of producerly indeterminacy (in Fiske's sense) that fuels participatory debate without granting any single instance of authorial fiat (Fiske, 1989, p. 122).

CDPR concretise that indeterminacy as a structural design choice in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* through the Skellige quest "The Last Wish", whose explicit, mechanical premise is that Yennefer has located the selfsame djinn in order to lift (or test) the old wish's bond. The encounter is carefully staged as a series of choice-gated dialogue beats, culminating in a binary where the player, as Geralt, either affirms that the relationship holds without magic or effectively admits that without the wish there is nothing there (CD Projekt Red, 2015). The quest text and walkthrough literature align with this structure. There is a mountain ascent, a seal that must be recovered, a summoning to be performed, and the culminating choice that finally "takes the wish back" or not (CD Projekt Red, 2015).

What matters here for authorship is not the romance itself, but who decides what counts as canon. Sapkowski's ambiguity works like a narratological governor: it keeps

the reader suspended in a productive in-between, where love might be both curse and choice, destiny and decision. CDPR, framing themselves (per Salter and Stanfill) as fan auteurs, translate that ambiguity into a canonical fork entrusted to the player's sovereign decision. This is an exemplary instance of what Foucault would call the author-function being distributed to a corporate system that delegates final classification to its users (Foucault, 1979, p. 23; Salter and Stanfill, 2020, pp. 3-5). In practice, the game writes two mutually exclusive relational futures, each subsequently remembered by later cut-scene lines and Yennefer's ambient dialogue, which sets the player's choice in stone. This feels much less like ephemeral "headcanon", or privately held interpretive preference without systemic enforcement, and much more like systemically authorised text, insofar as the outcome is persistently recorded and enforced by the game's narrative systems (CD Projekt Red, 2015).

Put differently, Sapkowski controls uncertainty on the printed page, while CDPR control the conditions under which uncertainty is resolved by players in their AAA game. Jenkins' convergence is not an abstract flow here; it's a proceduralisation of interpretation. The studio positions itself as a facilitator of fan judgement, even as it circumscribes that judgement to a finite set of authored outcomes (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 133-136). The "djinn unbinding" becomes CDPR's signature move. It is an industrial mechanism that performatively defers to the novels by honouring their ambiguity, while branding the studio as one of us, the fan auteur who "lets you decide" (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, pp. 3-5).

It is also a powerful example of how CDPR's design scaffolds emotion. In Sapkowski, the ambiguity generates debate; in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, the game renders that debate into an embodied sequence composed of wind-blown cliffs, a recovered artefact, a boss encounter, a conversation tree, and, crucially, quiet aftermath scenes whose tone varies depending on the choice. The result is a systematic authoring of intimacy. It also places CDPR beyond the role of inherited author, into the role of curator, or mediator. They delegate the act of canonical resolution to the player at the level of the protagonist's central relationship. That is why so many individual fans regularly treat their chosen outcomes as definitive. That is also why modders write compatibility patches and dialogue restorations keyed to this state, because the decision is stored as a persistent state variable that governs subsequent dialogue, cut-scenes, and world responses. The software treats the outcome as an ontological fact rather than a speculative desire, requiring all downstream content to align with it (CD Projekt Red, 2015).

There is, however, a limit to this dispersion that needs to be acknowledged. Where Sapkowski's ambiguity cannot be conclusively resolved (the text must remain two-minded to maintain its productive tension), CDPR's branch must terminate. The "you decide" structure becomes a tree with only two valid branches, institutionalising a particular *kind* of participatory authority. In Jenkins, Ford and Green's terms, it is a textbook case of managed spreadability. The studio facilitates circulation and co-creation (players share clips of their individual choices and the resultant scenes and

guides document both outcomes), while maintaining the underlying architecture of permissible readings (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, 189-190). Thus, even at the heart of intimacy, the studio's fan-auteur posture is both hospitable and delimiting. In effect, it is a curated dispersion that lets the player feel sovereign while quietly reaffirming industrial authorship.

My second example deals with the way that CDPR codifies mythology, transforming ephemeral allegory into concrete lore. In Sapkowski's novels, the Wild Hunt appears only fleetingly, more an atmospheric omen than a coherent political force. Ciri encounters them as spectral riders across the night sky, terrifying portents of death and destiny, but their ontology remains deliberately opaque. Sapkowski portrays them through the lens of folklore. The Hunt is seen by peasants within Sapkowski's folkloric register as an omen of war or plague, an uncanny eruption into the natural order that resists rational explanation (Sapkowski, 2013, pp. 11, 96-98). The narrative frames these apparitions through unreliable intermediaries, often filtered via rumour or second-hand testimony, thereby preserving their spectral ambiguity. This literary strategy situates the Hunt firmly within Sapkowski's technique of folkloric allusion and narrative obliquity, denying the reader a definitive explanation of their nature. They remain in the liminal space between symbol and diegetic reality, functioning less as characters and more as embodiments of inevitability and doom (Sapkowski, 2017, pp. 156-158).

By contrast, CDPR radically reconstitutes this uncertainty into a concrete political antagonist. *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* expands the spectral into the imperial. Eredin and the Aen Elle are depicted as an organised cavalry, given physicality, dialogue, motivation, and a coherent backstory rooted in interdimensional empire-building. The player actively battles them, pursuing quests across worlds; most notably through the "Through Time and Space" sequence, where Tir ná Lia becomes a fully visualised realm. What Sapkowski reserved for oblique hints, CDPR converts into explorable geography and codified lore. This is more than an expansion of Sapkowski's themes. This is a transformation of the Hunt from allegorical folkloric terror to structured antagonist. This shift exemplifies the broader process by which CDPR claim narrative authorship. Their interventions reframe the Wild Hunt from symbolic inevitability into defeatable foe, a change that fundamentally alters the interpretive function of the figure.

This translational act demonstrates again how CDPR occupy the position that Salter and Stanfill (2020, pp. 27-29) describe as the "fan auteur", simultaneously affirming and developing the source text while claiming legitimacy through its expansion. By building out the Aen Elle empire, CDPR position themselves as custodians of narrative depth, offering fans the world-building satisfaction that Sapkowski refused to provide. At the same time, the ludic framework of the game reframes player agency as authorial. The Hunt can be fought, foiled, and even understood through compendium entries and cutscenes, replacing Sapkowski's ambiguity with procedural clarity. The Hunt, once a folkloric rumour, becomes a boss battle. In Jenkins's (1992, pp. 23-24)

terms, the novels' readers could only poach around the gaps of Sapkowski's evasions. In the game, however, players are invited to occupy those gaps directly, making choices that generate closure.

This transformation exemplifies the semiotic struggle Fiske (1993, pp. 4-6) identifies, in which texts become sites of contestation between producers and audiences. Sapkowski's *Wild Hunt* resists final signification, functioning as folkloric excess that destabilises authorial control. CDPR's version inscribes stability, domesticating that excess into narrative order. This stabilisation has itself become a point of contention in fan discourse, where debates frequently emerge over whether CDPR's elaborations are legitimate extensions or excessive departures from Sapkowski's spectral framing. This tension is precisely the terrain of dispersed authorship – no single centre dictates meaning, but rather the competing claims of novelist, developer, and fan community intersect and clash.

At a broader narrative scale, this process of stabilisation is most clearly visible in the structural positioning of the *Wild Hunt* across the game's full arc, propelling this titular faction into the role of the inciting antagonist for much of a player's engagement with the primary plot. From the game's opening pursuit sequences, where spectral riders appear as cinematic foreshadowing, to the climactic battles at Kaer Morhen and, ultimately, against Eredin himself, the *Wild Hunt* is transformed into a coherent military and political entity. CDPR situates them as the Red Riders of the Aen Elle, giving their leader, Eredin Bréacc Glas, a fully articulated backstory, political motivations, and visual iconography. What Sapkowski gradually discloses through mythic, mediated revelation becomes in the game a narratively rationalised imperial structure, articulated through world-building rather than gameplay mechanics, with Tir ná Lia functioning as an explorable capital during the "Through Time and Space" questline. The Aen Elle, under Auberon and Avallac'h, are revealed to be enmeshed in dynastic schemes around Ciri's Elder Blood, thereby grounding Sapkowski's folkloric omens within a rationalised cosmological politics (Sapkowski, 2017, pp. 133-141; CD Projekt Red, 2015).

This shift from omen to empire exemplifies what Jenkins (2006, p. 3) describes as the logics of convergence culture, in which disparate media systems recode the same textual material to suit their own affordances and audience expectations. Ambiguity, a resource in Sapkowski's prose, becomes a liability in AAA game design, where antagonists must be systematised into boss fights and codex entries. The *Hunt* are no longer a mythical nightmare, but are now enemies with hitboxes, health bars, equipment sets, and dialogue trees. In this sense, CDPR stabilise the interpretive openness of Sapkowski's text, transforming folkloric polysemy into procedural determinacy. This stabilisation does not eliminate ambiguity entirely, however, as it rather displaces it into the participatory sphere, where fans debate, reinterpret, and re-author the *Hunt* across forums, wikis, and mods.

One striking example is the proliferation of fan modifications that re-skin or rewrite aspects of the Hunt, such as cosmetic overhauls of Eredin or lore-expanding quests created by modding communities. These practices are excellent examples of what Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, pp. 2-6) call “spreadability”: the way media texts circulate, transform, and accrue new value as they are shared and reworked across networked cultures. Players’ ability to mod the Hunt reflects more than basic engagement, transcending into what Lévy, Farley and Lollini (2019, p. 6) term stigmergic collective intelligence, in which traces left by one participant (a mod, a lore wiki entry, a fanfic reinterpretation) become the substrate upon which others build. The Wild Hunt thereby becomes not only a studio-authored antagonist but also a fan-authored phenomenon, continually remade through collaborative meaning-making.

At the same time, this fan activity does not occur on an even plane. Once again, CDPR themselves cultivate the “fan auteur” authorial position, as identified by Salter and Stanfill (2020, p. 28), by branding themselves as faithful inheritors of Sapkowski’s world through paratextual framing (as discussed earlier) and the controlled release of modding tools (examined in more detail below), while asserting corporate authorship through curated participatory structures. Their release of modding tools such as REDkit formalised Jenkins’s earlier notion of “textual poaching” (1992, pp. 23-25), transforming what might otherwise have been extra-legal fan practices into licensed co-creation within corporate boundaries. In the case of the Wild Hunt, this meant that while players could alter their aesthetic representation, their role as imperial antagonists remained a narrative fixture. Fans thus experienced a curated dispersion of authorship, permitted to tinker with surface elements while the underlying antagonistic architecture of the Hunt remained controlled by the studio.

This tension reveals the semiotic struggle that Fiske (1993, p. 15) theorises as central to popular culture. Sapkowski attempted to retain interpretive authority by withholding explanation; CDPR reasserted authority by stabilising the Hunt into a coherent antagonist; and fans pushed back by re-poaching the text through mods and alternative narratives. Each move reframed the balance of power over meaning. The Hunt thus stands as a microcosm of the Witcher franchise’s wider ecology of authorship. It oscillates between indeterminacy in the novels and stabilised antagonism in the games, while also being a continually re-opened site of contestation in fan discourse.

The contrast between Sapkowski’s spectral omen and CDPR’s imperial cavalry makes visible the dynamics of dispersed authorship that define the Witcher franchise. In the novels, the Wild Hunt remains an ambiguous signifier, glimpsed at the margins of vision, functioning less as an institution than as a folkloric omen that destabilises ontological certainty. Sapkowski’s refusal to stabilise the Hunt is consistent with what Foucault (1979, p. 23) calls the author-function: meaning is anchored to his name, but his textual strategies deliberately resist interpretive closure, thereby compelling readers to arbitrate between rumour and diegesis. By contrast, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* reconfigures that ambiguity into an antagonistic structure, transforming folklore

into procedural content. Eredin and his Riders are rationalised into a military faction, Tir ná Lia becomes a traversable space, and the Hunt's purpose is reframed as an empire's pursuit of Ciri's Elder Blood. What was once a spectral omen becomes a concrete, defined foe to be defeated.

Even so, this stabilisation does not end the interpretive debate, displacing it, instead. As Jenkins (2006, pp. 2-3) reminds us, convergence culture is characterised by the unpredictable interaction of top-down industrial strategies and bottom-up fan practices. CDPR's version of the Hunt imposes coherence, but that coherence is itself reappropriated by fans through discussion boards, wikis, and modifications. The Hunt becomes not only a corporate-authored antagonist but also a fan-authored object of reinterpretation, circulated through Jenkins, Ford and Green's (2013, pp. 2-6) logic of spreadability, as fans alter Eredin's appearance, write alternate quests, and debate canonicity across platforms, each act leaving a trace that others build upon. In Lévy, Farley and Lollini's (2019, pp. 5-7) terms, these traces feed into a stigmergic collective intelligence, producing a collaborative and continually revised image of the Hunt that no single node of authorship can entirely control.

This oscillation between Sapkowski's ambiguity, CDPR's coherence, and fan re-elaboration epitomises Fiske's (1993, p. 15) model of popular culture as a site of semiotic struggle. Sapkowski's reluctant authorial posture withholds authority while insisting on the primacy of his books; CDPR assert a fan-auteur position by elaborating on withheld material until it becomes lore; and fans resist both by tactically reworking the Hunt into the stories they want to tell. The result is not authorial death, as Barthes (1977, p. 148) once asserted, but proliferation. Authorship fragments into a polycentric ecology in which each of the literary, corporate-industrial, and participatory nodes shares and negotiates meaning.

The above examples, therefore, crystallise the "third model" of authorship developed across this chapter. Where *Game of Thrones* exemplified an authorial vacuum that empowered predictive fandom, and Harry Potter revealed the fractures caused by an over-present author, the Witcher demonstrates what occurs when authorship disperses across multiple centres of authority. The Hunt is not authored by Sapkowski alone, nor by CDPR, nor by fan communities, but by the intersecting tensions between all three. In this sense, the Witcher franchise confirms that contemporary authorship cannot be understood as either absence or domination. It is better conceived as a dispersed and contested ecology in which every attempt to stabilise meaning becomes the occasion for its re-opening elsewhere.

What distinguishes the following examples from earlier discussion is not their thematic continuity, but the way authorship becomes operationalised through player-facing mechanics rather than narrative framing alone. Naturally, there are further examples of the way CDPR transforms Sapkowski's authorship. In Sapkowski's Saga, Geralt is often displaced as the narrative's central subject, with Ciri emerging as the true protagonist around whom the series' destiny arcs revolve. The novels' later volumes,

such as *The Tower of the Swallow* and *The Lady of the Lake*, downplay Geralt's perspective in favour of Ciri's development as a traumatised yet powerful figure navigating multiple worlds. Ciri remains pivotal as her fate drives the main questline, but *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) reframes her as a character whose destiny is *shaped by the player's choices*. Through branching outcomes, Ciri can emerge triumphant, estranged, or even dead, depending on how Geralt has behaved.

This design decision marks a shift from adaptive interpretation to delegated authorship. On one hand, it acknowledges Sapkowski's core narrative arc: Ciri is "the child of destiny" and her choices determine the future of the Continent. On the other, it rewrites this arc into a structure of player-driven authorship, where fan-participants co-create her ending, while robbing her of almost all the agency granted her by the novels. Sapkowski's tightly controlled narrative is reimagined through the affordances of interactivity, demonstrating Jenkins' (2006, pp. 2-3) argument that convergence culture collapses boundaries between producer and consumer.

Sapkowski's novels are narratively dense but geographically narrow. Much of the action occurs within courts, camps, and small towns, with worldbuilding conveyed through dialogue rather than detailed description. In *Blood of Elves*, for instance, the political geography of the Continent is established almost entirely through council debates, where borders, trade routes, and the advance of Nilfgaard are articulated through competing speeches rather than narrated movement (Sapkowski, 2009, pp. 216-218). This strategy persists in *The Lady of the Lake*, where even the shift to Arthurian Britain yields only dialogic references to routes and regions that are immediately foreclosed, keeping geography functional rather than immersive (Sapkowski, 2017, pp. 12-13). CDPR expanded this into an open world, richly populated with regions, cultures, and histories. Novigrad, Skellige, and Toussaint are all elaborations, rather than direct adaptations. Each blends elements of Sapkowski's lore with new inventions designed for gameplay immersion.

Here, CDPR's fan-auteur posture shifts from narrative supplementation to institutionalised world-completion, transforming interpretive gaps into navigable, explorable space. These expansions reposition CDPR as custodians of an inhabited world rather than interpreters of a closed text. As Salter and Stanfill (2020, p. 12) note, the fan auteur legitimises their creative authority by leveraging affective identification with fandom while occupying an industrial position of power. In practice, this often entails expanding narrative spaces that the source text leaves underdeveloped, transforming perceived gaps into opportunities for authorised elaboration. CDPR effectively institutionalised fan practices of "world-completion", offering spaces for exploration that mirror the desire of readers to inhabit the Continent more fully.

Perhaps the most distinctive contribution of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* is its side quests, which often bear little direct relation to Sapkowski's Saga. Unlike earlier adaptations, these quests do not translate Sapkowski's plots but assume authorial authority to generate new canonical experiences. Quests such as "Family Matter", in which Geralt

unravels the abuse and trauma within the family of the Bloody Baron, demonstrate CDPR's ability to craft morally complex, narratively resonant stories that parallel Sapkowski's ethical structures without directly adapting his narrative events. The quest's refusal of a morally "clean" outcome, and its insistence that intervention merely redistributes suffering, closely mirrors the logic of Sapkowski's short story "The Lesser Evil", in which Geralt's attempt to avoid choosing between evils nonetheless culminates in public violence and lasting moral stigma, earning him the epithet "the Butcher of Blaviken" (Sapkowski, 2008, pp. 66-70). In both cases, the cost of choice is not resolution but ethical fallout; *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* reframes this structure through interactivity, forcing players to inhabit the same compromised position that Sapkowski's prose assigns to Geralt.

Such quests reveal the hybridity of authorship: they are not simply derivative of Sapkowski but constitute original contributions that critics and commentators recognise as among the most memorable narrative achievements in *The Witcher 3*. Retrospectives on open-world storytelling argue that "few of *The Witcher 3*'s... players can forget the Bloody Baron's deep, uneasy ruefulness", highlighting the quest's emotional gravitas and narrative depth (Gordon, 2025). Similarly, *GamingBible* noted that "this entire quest line is masterfully done", signalling its wide acclaim within gaming commentary (Breslin, 2024). Writing for TheGamer also emphasises how the quest's writing makes player decisions matter in a way few RPGs manage to accomplish (King, 2021). These responses suggest that CD Projekt Red were not merely adapting Sapkowski's material but actively authoring narrative experiences that stand alongside the novels in terms of affective complexity and player engagement. In Fiskean terms, such critical recognition demonstrates how CDPR's procedural and interactive design transformed the novels' producerly indeterminacy into sites of semiotic productivity, allowing individual participants to construct socially meaningful interpretations through engagement with richly authored quests.

CDPR also drew on fantasy and gaming intertexts to make the *Witcher* universe more appealing to global audiences. The *Witcher*'s monsters are often coded as echoes of universal archetypes, such as vampires, werewolves, and the spectral cavalcade popularly known as the Wild Hunt. This serves to situate Sapkowski's Slavic folklore within a broader fantasy grammar recognisable to players beyond Eastern Europe; as previously discussed at length, the Hunt's status shifts markedly between the novels and CDPR's adaptation. At the same time, CDPR layered these archetypes with localised flavour in bestiary entries and questlines, preserving a trace of Sapkowski's folkloric density while making it legible to international players. This does not reverse Sapkowski's foreclosure of authorship at the textual level; rather, it relocates folklore from a mechanism of interpretive control into a resource for transmedia circulation, enabling polyvalent authorship across markets without relinquishing institutional authority. This intertextual balancing act is characteristic of what Johnson (2013, pp. 160-161) describes as the franchising logic of "cultural translation" where texts must circulate between specific local origins and global markets.

One of the clearest ways CDPR consolidated its reputation as a “fan auteur” was by actively facilitating fan participation through modding. Where many AAA studios restrict modification to protect intellectual property, CDPR positioned itself as unusually open, encouraging players to create, alter, and expand the Witcher universe. This openness did more than generating goodwill among the fans; it became a form of distributed authorship in which fans shared the work of producing meaning within the franchise. Crucially, this repositioned authorship from a matter of interpretation to one of infrastructural participation.

Lévy, Farley and Lollini (2019, pp. 6-7) characterise collective intelligence as a process of stigmergic interaction in which distributed participants iteratively build shared knowledge. Modding communities around *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* embody this dynamic. From cosmetic changes such as new character appearances to expansive projects like community-made questlines, fans collaborate to extend the life of the game far beyond its official content. For instance, mods that alter Ciri’s appearance or dialogue reflect fans’ own interpretations of her character, while custom quests reimagine narrative arcs that Sapkowski never wrote and CDPR never sanctioned. These interventions exemplify Jenkins’ (1992, p. 30-33) “textual poaching” where fans transform existing texts to satisfy their own cultural and ideological needs, while also extending Jenkins, Ford and Green’s (2013, pp. 2-3) conception of spreadable media by actively reshaping the flow of the franchise’s content itself.

CDPR’s infrastructural decisions amplified this participatory culture. By releasing modding tools such as the *REDkit* and hosting DRM-free versions of its games on the GOG platform, CDPR lowered barriers to fan creativity. This openness positioned them as allies rather than gatekeepers. In contrast to Sapkowski’s hostility towards adaptations, CDPR embraced the co-creative ethos of convergence culture, allowing fans to become visible participants in authorship. This participatory stance reinforced CDPR’s branding as both authentic fans and legitimate professionals: the “fan auteur” who not only respects the source material but welcomes fans into its expansion.

This co-creative openness was not without limits, however. As Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, p. 189) caution, networked participation is rarely an equal playing field; corporate structures retain asymmetrical power. While CDPR welcomed fan mods, they maintained final authority over canon through their official expansions (*Hearts of Stone* (2015), *Blood and Wine* (2016)) and through intellectual property enforcement in contexts that threatened their commercial interests. The participatory relationship was thus carefully managed – fans were invited to play in the Witcher’s sandbox, but only within boundaries that preserved CDPR’s ultimate control over canon and circulation.

This tension illustrates John Fiske’s argument that “Language is a crucial site of struggle” (Fiske, 1993, p. 31), foregrounding meaning-making itself as an arena of power and contestation – a formulation that situates popular culture within ongoing struggles over meaning. Fans used mods tactically to reshape characters, add

representation, or extend storylines, often resisting or subverting official design choices. But CDPR remained the structural gatekeeper, determining which forms of co-creation would be tolerated. For example, while cosmetic mods that diversified Geralt's appearance proliferated, the studio never integrated such changes into official canon, signalling a boundary between tolerated play and institutional authorship – a distinction mirrored in the treatment of fan fiction, which flourishes as vernacular authorship yet remains excluded from official canon.

Taken together, these practices mark a progression from adaptive fidelity to infrastructural governance, distinguishing CDPR's authorship from both Sapkowski's textual control and Netflix's corporate simplification. By hosting and legitimising fan authorship, they positioned themselves as custodians of a participatory ecosystem rather than as producers of closed texts. This marks a profound divergence from Sapkowski's model of authorship, where the novels function as fixed canonical objects. In CDPR's *Witcher* universe, authorship is dispersed, with players and fans actively involved in meaning-making. This composite authority, however, is also strategic, as CDPR's willingness to enable collective authorship fed back into their corporate brand, securing loyalty from fans who perceived the studio as unusually transparent and collaborative. Authorship in CDPR's *Witcher* is thus neither surrendered nor shared evenly, but redistributed in ways that secure both participatory legitimacy and corporate authority.

If Sapkowski's refusal to legitimate transmedia adaptation and CDPR's cultivation of a fan-centred authorial persona mark two divergent approaches to authorship in the *Witcher* franchise, Netflix represents a more industrially structured configuration in which authorship emerges less from individual vision than from the platform's infrastructural logics. To speak of Netflix as "algorithmic author" is not to imagine code writing narrative but to recognise, following Amanda Lotz (2017, pp. 39-42, 48-49), that subscription video-on-demand platforms function primarily as portals. They are interfaces where commissioning, production, and distribution are all oriented toward maximising retention and growth across international markets. Netflix's own engineers are clear that their recommender system sits at the heart of this environment, translating user traces into "business value" by shaping both distribution and the kinds of content the company is willing to develop (Gómez-Urbe and Hunt, 2015, pp. 13:1-13:2), a logic that parallels CDPR's own treatment of the *Witcher* as a modular, market-responsive product rather than a closed literary work.

This configuration is crucial because, as later comparisons make clear, Netflix's authorising environment proves fragile when its industrial logics are not effectively mediated through figures recognised as legitimate by fan communities. It is within this authorising environment that Lauren Schmidt Hissrich is foregrounded in promotional interviews and industry paratexts as the singular creative figure behind the adaptation. Yet this persona must be read, as Jonathan Gray (2010, pp. 114-116) argues of paratextual labour more generally, as a form of industrial narrative-making. She is, in many ways, a persona presenting a performance that personalises corporate logic by

disguising commissioning imperatives as creative vision. The showrunner's presence does not, therefore, signal sovereign authorship. In Foucauldian terms, the author-function here is dispersed across algorithmic commissioning tools, corporate brand management, and the public persona of the showrunner (Foucault, 1979, p. 23), which together produce a form of authorship that is at once centralised and impersonal. It is centralised in the way Netflix positions Hissrich as guarantor of fidelity, but impersonal in the way creative decision-making is tethered to metrics of onboarding clarity, broad genre legibility, and the pursuit of spreadability across global networks (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, pp. 2-4, 22-23; Salter and Stanfill, 2020, pp. xvii-xviii).

Netflix's own descriptions of its operational culture make clear how this authorising environment is sustained. In a landmark article outlining their recommender system, Gómez-Urbe and Hunt (2015, 13:7-13:8) stress that algorithmic personalisation is designed to both order distribution and to optimise "business value", determining which content is prioritised, how it is displayed, and crucially what kinds of projects the company is willing to support at the level of commissioning. Such statements are echoed in Lotz's (2017, pp. 39-41) account of Netflix as a portal, in which technical infrastructure and business model are inseparable. User traces feed directly into industrial decisions about genre, narrative, pacing, and release strategy. Insiders describe this culture as one of constant experimentation, where A/B testing, trialling of thumbnails, and granular monitoring of early drop-off rates inform not just distribution but the evaluation of whether a text "works" at all (Low, 2022). Netflix executives often claim that commissioning mixes "data with judgement" rather than being determined solely by algorithm, but the gravitational pull of metrics is unmistakable, particularly under budgetary pressure (Low, 2022).

From the outside, critics have described this tendency in more polemical terms: a turn toward what *The Guardian* dubbed the "gourmet cheeseburger", content designed to be glossy, globally accessible, and instantly legible, if rarely idiosyncratic or culturally specific (Hoad, 2025). To characterise Netflix's role in *The Witcher* as "algorithmic authorship" is, therefore, to highlight this ecology based on the way infrastructural logics shape commissioning and reception in advance, setting the horizon within which creative labour is expected to perform.

The Witcher was framed from the outset within precisely this commissioning horizon, consistently positioned in publicity as Netflix's answer to HBO's *Game of Thrones*. Early trade coverage underscored this comparison, presenting the series as a prestige fantasy designed to fill the gap left by HBO's concluded juggernaut, with *Wired* headlining its December 2019 review, "Netflix Wants The Witcher to Be the Next Game of Thrones. It Isn't." (Bedingfield, 2019), thereby explicitly framing the series within the shadow of HBO's cultural benchmark. Promotional material emphasised costly spectacle, adult tonal registers, and recognisable genre pleasures, such as battle sequences, intense action, court intrigue, and the grotesque, which are all markers of what Lotz (2017, pp. 47-48) identifies as the strategic market logic of subscriber-funded portals.

The adaptation's structure was likewise indicative of this horizon: Sapkowski's short stories were reorganised into three asynchronous timelines, a device defended by Hissrich as a way to present Geralt, Yennefer, and Ciri to audiences "all at once", ensuring that none of the protagonists was sidelined in the crucial onboarding period (Maas and Owen, 2020). In practice, this decision translated the recommender's imperatives of retention and accessibility into a creative rationale, rendering industrial calculation through the idiom of storytelling. Netflix's subsequent PR cycles then reinforced this logic by reducing legitimacy to a metric. In July 2023 the platform's official blog announced Season 3's debut at number one globally with 15.2 million "views" in its first charted week, making performance itself a paratextual narrative of authorship (Netflix, 2023). In such contexts, authorship is less the mark of a singular vision than the visible intersection of marketing framings, commissioning imperatives, and showrunner justifications, each bearing the imprint of the algorithmic horizon.

What these dynamics make clear is that Netflix's commissioning logic, while structurally present in every case, is not in itself determinative of success or failure, but instead sets the conditions under which mediation becomes decisive. The decisive variable is mediation, insofar as the presence of trusted figures and participatory practices can translate industrial imperatives into assurances of authenticity. Salter and Stanfill (2020, pp. xvii-xviii) describe the "fan auteur" as precisely such a figure – an intermediary who operates simultaneously as "one of us" and "one of them", leveraging this dual identity to reassure audiences that adaptive departures remain consistent with a work's spirit.

Jenkins (1992, pp. 88-89) has already noted in his study of television fans that interpretive authority is often negotiated through these mediators, who enable audiences to read corporate products as communal rather than imposed. Later, with Ford and Green, he theorises spreadability as the condition by which texts derive value through grassroots circulation, becoming meaningful not when broadcast but when taken up by audiences who share and rework them (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, pp. 2-4). Pierre Lévy's (1997, p. 20) notion of collective intelligence sharpens this insight by emphasising how networked publics produce meaning collectively through cumulative, "stigmergic" practices enabled by particular textual affordances (Lévy, Farley and Lollini, 2019, pp. 6-7). In this context, the significance is that creators who visibly align themselves with these infrastructures can buffer industrial authorship, while those who do not render platform logics more exposed and more readily read as illegitimate impositions (Fiske, 1993, pp. 23-25; Gray, 2010, pp. 114-115).

The contrasting reception of the Netflix productions of *One Piece* and *The Sandman*⁴ demonstrates how algorithmic authorship can be stabilised when it is effectively

⁴ *One Piece* originated as a manga series written and illustrated by Eiichirō Oda, first serialised in 1997, and has since expanded into a long-running anime, films, video games, and a Netflix live-action adaptation (2023). *The Sandman*, created by Neil Gaiman, began as a DC/Vertigo comic series published between 1989 and 1996 and was later adapted into a Netflix series (2022–), with Gaiman serving as developer and executive producer. Both franchises are significant here because their recent adaptations foreground

mediated through figures already authorised by fan communities. In the case of *One Piece*, Eiichirō Oda's unusually visible and sustained involvement became the central paratext. Netflix repeatedly published his letters through its Tudum platform, in which he stressed that he was reviewing scripts, offering corrections, and that the adaptation would not be released until he was satisfied. These assurances framed the series as contingent on creator approval rather than platform calculation, proactively narrowing the algorithmic horizon (Netflix, 2016; Bitran, 2023). The effect was measurable, as Netflix's own engagement reports show that *One Piece* was its most-watched title globally in the second half of 2023, accruing more than 71 million "views" (roughly 542 million hours of viewing), a remarkable achievement for a new franchise in a catalogue dominated by library titles (Bell, 2023; Cobb, 2024). Oda's presence functioned not only as symbolic guarantor but as a practical authoriser, transforming industrial commissioning into perceived fidelity.

The Sandman illustrates a related but distinct mode of mediation. Neil Gaiman's decades-long reputation for resisting poor adaptations was folded into his role as executive producer, with interviews and features foregrounding his personal involvement in script revisions and casting decisions. His authority was further staged paratextually in the unexpected release of a two-part "bonus" episode weeks after the initial drop, a curatorial gesture that emphasised the figure of the attentive creator still watching over the adaptation (Travis, 2022; DiLillo, 2022). Here, too, industrial authorship was buffered by the symbolic capital of a trusted creative figure, whose persona reframed corporate commissioning as a faithful act of care. In both cases, algorithmic logics (meaning the role of platform metrics and recommendation systems in shaping visibility and production priorities) remained present, as they underwrote commissioning and release, but were mediated through creators already authorised by fan communities. In doing so, they ensured that spreadability could be experienced as an organic circulation rather than as a corporate strategy.

Ironically, the ethical dimensions of this mediated authorship have since become more fraught. In 2024, sexual misconduct allegations were made against Gaiman, which he denied, but which nonetheless prompted the cancellation or alteration of many projects, alongside public debate about his continued authority as a creative figure (Stefansky, 2025). With regard to *The Sandman*, showrunner Allan Heinberg and co-creator David S. Goyer emphasised that the decision to end the series with its second season pre-dated these allegations, and that Gaiman's role in day-to-day production had already been reduced (Squires, 2025). Despite this controversy, Season 2 was completed and released, largely due to its advanced stage of production and the substantial commitments of cast and crew (Maas, 2025), though it seems that the pall which settled on Gaiman has ensured that no further seasons will be forthcoming. This sequence of events illustrates how symbolic authority can be destabilised when the

visible creator involvement as a legitimating paratext, positioning authorial presence as a stabilising force within highly participatory fan environments.

“trusted creator” figure becomes contested, while industrial logics simultaneously attempt to preserve narrative coherence and affective continuity for audiences.

By contrast, *The Witcher* lacked the stabilising mediation that enabled *One Piece* and *The Sandman* to succeed. Sapkowski’s studied distance from transmedia adaptation deprived the series of a literary guarantor at precisely the moment Netflix sought a pedigree of legitimacy. Although he was credited as a “creative consultant”, Sapkowski himself later admitted that his involvement was minimal and that the producers “never listened” to his suggestions (Bajda, 2017; Wolens, 2023). His well-documented scepticism towards adaptation, most infamously illustrated by his refusal to treat CDPR’s games as canon or to engage substantively with their global success (Bajda, 2017), left the series without the imprimatur of its original author. CDPR, meanwhile, whose *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* had cultivated a massive participatory audience and institutionalised fan labour through modding frameworks, were not tied to the adaptation in any formal way, removing a second potential site of mediation.

This left Hissrich’s persona to carry the burden alone, but her public positioning often reinforced the perception that she was an emissary of the platform, rather than a fan auteur. In interviews she defended the controversial decision to fragment the first season into three desynchronised timelines as a way to help new audiences grasp the equal importance of Geralt, Yennefer, and Ciri, a rationale consistent with Netflix’s commissioning logics (Maas and Owen, 2020). At other moments producers suggested that Sapkowski’s work was “very dense” and “confusing” and required “untangling” for a contemporary television audience (Lewis, 2023). While such remarks may be understood as a showrunner’s attempt to explain the adaptive process, fans already suspicious of Netflix’s motives read them as dismissive of the novels themselves, underscoring the impression that industrial calculation rather than reverence for the text was driving adaptation.

Without the presence of a trusted mediator like Oda or Gaiman, these comments were interpreted as evidence of platform overreach, leaving *The Witcher* unusually exposed to fan resistance and vulnerable to precisely the kind of semiotic struggle Fiske (1993, p. 30) theorises. Fans invoked Sapkowski’s novels, or the CDPR games, as counter-authorities against what they read as the industrial flattening of *The Witcher*’s mythos, a pattern that became increasingly visible in the concrete controversies that followed. Because the show lacked a credible mediator to buffer platform authorship, deviations in casting, costuming, narrative structure, and tonal inflection increasingly came to be read not as creative expansion or necessary adaptation, but as evidence of Netflix’s algorithmic calculation – a perception that solidified through a series of highly visible disputes.

The absence of stabilising mediation was first made visible in the 2018 casting controversy surrounding Ciri. A leaked casting call indicating a preference for a “BAME” (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic) actress for the role provoked a wave of hostile responses from segments of the fan community, who claimed that the character must

reflect Sapkowski's "Slavic" cultural milieu (Hibberd, 2018; Jackson, 2018). For some, this insistence drew upon the folkloric specificity of the novels; for others, the visual aesthetic established by CDPR – produced in Poland and steeped in Central European iconography – functioned as the *de facto* canon. In both readings, Netflix's colour-conscious approach was not understood as creative enrichment but as evidence of platform cosmopolitanism, its global commissioning strategy overriding fidelity to a culturally specific text. Hissrich, who attempted to defend the decision on Twitter/X, ultimately withdrew from the platform after receiving sustained harassment (Hibberd, 2018), a withdrawal widely reported as indicative of the hostility surrounding her role.

The controversy around Ciri's casting was only the beginning of a broader and increasingly entrenched series of disputes over representation. In subsequent seasons, similar debates surrounded the decisions to cast actors of colour as Triss and Yennefer. Producers defended these choices as deliberate opportunities to expand the representational field of fantasy television and to "challenge what people think of as the standard of beauty." (Kain, 2023), but many fans pointed out that Sapkowski's novels contained no such diversity and that CDPR's games had cemented a visual aesthetic that was overwhelmingly coded as Central European. For those invested in fidelity, such departures were interpreted less as creative reinterpretation than as "Hollywoodisation": the homogenising logic of global platform standardisation, flattening a culturally specific text to satisfy global commissioning norms (Fiske, 1993, p. 30; Gray, 2010, p. 18-19, 40). The absence of Sapkowski's endorsement, CDPR's exclusion, and Oda- or Gaiman-like mediators meant that paratextual spaces which could have stabilised audience reception instead became sites of heightened suspicion and semiotic struggle.

This atmosphere of mistrust also reframed how audiences evaluated the show's most controversial formal decision, shifting the conflict from representational politics to questions of narrative competence and readerly expectation. Critics noted the ambition of attempting to balance Geralt, Yennefer, and Ciri's arcs in parallel, but audiences often described the result as confusing or unnecessarily opaque (Miller, 2020; Selcke, 2020). Hissrich defended the structure in interviews, presenting it as a pedagogical intervention designed to allow unfamiliar viewers to grasp all three protagonists as equally important from the outset (Maas and Owen, 2020). On one level, this rationale cohered perfectly with Netflix's commissioning imperatives of onboarding clarity and retention, ensuring that audiences did not disengage before the ensemble was fully introduced. Precisely because the logic mapped so neatly onto the platform's priorities, however, it was interpreted by many fans as evidence that the adaptation was being shaped by algorithmic calculation rather than by fidelity to Sapkowski's textual strategies.

For readers of the novels, whose layered narratology depends on shifting perspectives and unreliable narrators (Sapkowski, 2008, pp. 4-23), and for players of CDPR's games, where temporal density and branching quests extend narrative consequence,

this formal decision was evaluated through a markedly different interpretive lens. Instead of enriching the text through formal innovation, the adaptation appeared to simplify the narrative in order to serve “casual” viewers. In this sense, the restructuring was not mediated as creative enrichment but received as industrial simplification, the imprint of the algorithmic horizon visible in the very bones of the story.

This comparative contrast underscores the fragility of Netflix’s authorising environment when left unmediated. Oda’s letters reframed departures from the *One Piece* manga as author-approved, and Gaiman’s curatorial persona rendered *The Sandman*’s deviations acts of fidelity rather than betrayal (Netflix, 2016; Holub, 2021). By contrast, Hissrich’s explanations carried little symbolic capital. She was not received as a fan auteur but as a platform emissary, so that her paratextual defences of creative decisions were read as further confirmation of corporate authorship. The result was that what might otherwise have been understood as adaptive experimentation became a flashpoint for fan resistance, amplifying the perception that the series was authored less by its showrunner than by the metrics of its platform.

If Henry Cavill became the most persuasive “guardian” of fidelity in this ecology, it is because he consistently positioned himself as a fan speaking from inside the text. In interviews around the first season he emphasised that his “first involved experience” was *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, which he had played through multiple times, and that his overriding aim was to keep Geralt “as true to the lore as possible”, lobbying for the inclusion of the witcher’s “signs” because, as a fan, those details “mattered” to how the character reads on screen (White, 2019; Cobb, 2021). He also made clear that he had read Sapkowski’s novels in preparation for his role as Geralt and drew directly from them in shaping his performance (Cobb, 2021). At the same time, he rejected the “toxic fandom” frame circulating in the press, preferring to describe Witcher fans as “passionate” communities to whom he felt accountable, thereby fashioning himself as “one of us” rather than “one of them” (Liu, 2019). This self-presentation functioned as a paratextual warranty of fidelity that many fans accepted as more authoritative than platform statements.

That warranty became organisational the moment his continuation in the role was questioned. When Netflix confirmed Cavill’s departure at the end of 2022, petitions proliferated. Two are of particular interest, as one demanded that he remain as Geralt, while another called for Hissrich’s removal. Both proved to be rallying points for the fandom, with signatures rising into the hundreds of thousands within days (Ma, 2022; Светомиров, 2022; Liu, 2022). Whatever one makes of petitions as political instruments, their evidentiary value here is straightforward, as they clearly illustrate that Cavill had become the figurehead of resistance, the living proxy for a particular reading of Sapkowski’s novels and CDPR’s elaboration of them.

Placed against Netflix’s commissioning horizon, this affective politics clarifies why the same platform logics that could be successfully mediated in other prestige franchises were here read as illegitimate. Hissrich’s own paratexts consistently foregrounded

pedagogical and onboarding imperatives – making three protagonists legible “all at once” through desynchronised timelines; reshaping storylines for episodic coherence; promising at points that later seasons would be closer to the novels (Maas and Owen, 2020; Whitbrook, 2020; Gennis, 2019). These are intelligible showrunner reasons, but they align precisely with Lotz’s (2017, pp. 13-14, 39-41) account of global addressability incentives. Where mediation is strong, such rationales are taken as evidence of stewardship; where it is weak, they are read as corporate policy voiced through a persona. That weakness was amplified by Sapkowski’s own dismissal of his consultancy role, remarking in late 2023 that he had “maybe” offered ideas but that Netflix “never listened” (Wolens, 2023). Former writer Beau DeMayo’s claim that some writers “were not [fans] or actively disliked the books and games”, widely reported in the trade-press ecosystem, added further fuel to the fire of fan discontent (Selcke, 2022; Liu, 2022).

Read together, these paratexts account for how Cavill came to be installed by audiences as a fan auteur in absentia. His repeated declarations of attachment to Sapkowski’s fiction and CDPR’s games (White, 2019; BGN staff, 2019) were briefly reinforced by the platform’s own metrics, as Season 3 peaked at 15.2 million “views” in its first charted week before discourse volatility set in (Netflix, 2023). This moment helped to crystallise a binary through which subsequent adaptation choices were interpreted, with Cavill as guarantor of fidelity, and Hissrich as emissary of the platform. Whether or not this binary fairly represents the creative process is beside the point; as Fiske (1989, pp. 126-127) and Gray (2010, pp. 33-35) remind us, what matters for textual politics is how interpretive communities marshal paratexts to stabilise meaning. In this case, they marshalled Cavill.

These controversies demonstrate that Netflix’s commissioning logics are not unique to *The Witcher* but that their visibility depends upon mediation. In *One Piece*, Oda’s letters and visible oversight reframed departures as canon-affirming, transforming industrial calculation into perceived authorial care (Netflix, 2016; Bitran, 2023). In *The Sandman*, Gaiman’s curatorial persona meant that inclusive casting and narrative condensation were received, not as algorithmic flattening but as faithful stewardship (Holub, 2021). By contrast, in *The Witcher*, the absence of Sapkowski, the exclusion of CDPR, and the perception of Hissrich as a platform emissary left Netflix’s corporate “machinations” unusually exposed. Casting controversies were read as algorithmic diversity mandates, the nonlinear timeline as onboarding contrivance, and Cavill’s departure as the removal of the only credible fan auteur.

This pattern clarifies the conditions under which algorithmic authorship can be legitimated. The industrial logics described by Lotz (2017, pp. 13-14, 39-41) and evidenced in Netflix’s own accounts of its recommender culture (Gómez-Uribe and Hunt, 2015, pp. 1-3) are always operative. What varies is whether they are buffered by trusted mediators and aligned with participatory infrastructures. When they are, spreadability is experienced as organic circulation, and audiences embrace adaptive departures as fidelity reframed. When they are not, the same logics are read as

corporate imposition, and fan resistance mobilises competing author-functions to reclaim interpretive control (Fiske, 1993, p. 69; Jenkins, 1992, p. 23; Salter and Stanfill, 2020, pp. x-xi). *The Witcher's* turbulence, then, lies less in the presence of platform authorship than in its unusual legibility, its failure to conceal calculation behind the mask of the fan auteur. At this point, however, to leave the analysis here would risk overstating the power of paratexts alone.

The volatility of *The Witcher's* reception also reflects the interpretive labour of fans themselves, who do not merely react to paratexts but employ them as resources in their own contestations. As outlined in Chapter 1, Jenkins argues in his early work on fandom, and Lévy later theorises in his conception of collective intelligence, that audiences are not passive recipients but networked publics capable of producing meaning collectively and strategically (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23; Lévy, 1997, pp. 13-14; 2013, pp. 34-36). It is to these practices of creation, resistance, transformation, and reframing of the *Witcher's* dispersed author-function that the analysis must now turn.

If Chapters 1 and 2 established the spectrum between a vacuum of authorial authority (*Game of Thrones*) and its overabundance (Harry Potter), this chapter's *Witcher* case reveals how fans act when authority is neither empty nor overfull but multiply claimed and unevenly distributed. The move from sovereign author to dispersed author-function does not pacify interpretive struggle; it intensifies it. As in Rowling-era disputes where queer and trans fans rewrote Hogwarts against the grain of the author's public statements, *Witcher* fans mobilise similar tactics of semiotic appropriation and tactical creativity, but now across a triangulated field of Sapkowski, CDPR, and Netflix (Fiske, 1993, p. 69; Jenkins, 1992, p. 23; Lévy, Farley and Lollini, 2019, pp. 6-8). The result is factionalised participation, with novel purists, game-first players, Netflix-first viewers, and cross-platform hybrids each staking claims to canonicity through practices that range from interpretive essays and fan fiction to technical modding and paratextual campaigns (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, pp. 2-3).

One emblematic site for this contest is the explosion of Geralt/Jaskier ("Geraskier") shipping (the fan-produced romantic and sexual pairing of the two characters) after Netflix's first season. By August 2020, within months of the show's December 2019 debut, Geralt/Jaskier entered the AO3 all-time Top 100 at rank 83 (centreftheselights, 2020). In the 2020 Year in Review list of new works, it ranked 64th by output for that year (centreftheselights, 2021b). By the 2021 all-time report, it had risen to 44th overall, reflecting a movement of 39 places within twelve months (centreftheselights, 2021a). In 2022, it peaked at 22nd in the all-time ranking, while also appearing 34th in the annual gain table (centreftheselights, 2022a; 2022b). While the pairing has since ceded ground to newer zeitgeist phenomena, its continued presence in subsequent annual gain and total-work charts into 2022–23 illustrates a durable, transmedia-driven corpus that outlived the initial streaming spike (centreftheselights, 2020–2023). Read through Jenkins' account of "textual poaching", the point is not simply volume but method. Netflix's star casting and meme-ready paratexts furnished prompts that fans

then reworked into affective continuities and alternate chronologies, treating the bard's on-screen intimacy cues as licences for queer world-building that neither Sapkowski's novels nor CDPR's mainline quest design had delivered (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 170-172; Jenkins, 2006, 95-96). In terms of spreadability, Geraskier travelled well because its component beats (in the form of the tavern duet, the Mountain break-up, and the apology) compressed easily into GIF-length capsules that circulated beyond the show's own paratexts and seeded fic, vids, memes, and metafiction (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, pp. 25-27).

That same circulation sharpened fault-lines around race and representation long familiar from Chapter 2's Harry Potter discussion. When, in 2018, reports surfaced that the Ciri casting call sought BAME actresses, parts of the fandom invoked Sapkowski's "Slavic" vision to police racial boundaries, prompting a wave of backlash severe enough for the showrunner to step back from Twitter/X, as mentioned previously. Naturally, industry outlets chronicled both the rumour and the response (Jackson, 2018; Hibberd, 2018; Baculi, 2022). The ensuing discourse, focused through petitions and threads across multiple platforms, rehearsed the same argumentative templates we saw marshalled against Rowling, but here the "appeal to author" became strategically inconsistent. Netflix-sceptics cited Sapkowski to challenge casting while, elsewhere, Netflix-first shippers dismissed the novels' authority in favour of on-screen chemistry and affective plausibility. In Fiske's terms, these are ordinary features of a culture where semiotic resources are unevenly distributed, and audiences make "tactical" appropriations across frictional institutions (Fiske, 1993, p. 69). Lévy's notion of "collective intelligence" clarifies why these disputes produce knowledge rather than mere noise: spreadsheets of ship counts, compilation posts of casting statements, and community FAQs do more than recording preference; they operationalise it, turning thousands of micro-interpretations into shared heuristics for future reading and making (Lévy, Farley and Lollini, 2019, pp. 6-8, 12-14).

If Geralt and Jaskier provide one locus for queer reworking, Ciri is the more structurally significant battleground across novel, game, and series. In Sapkowski's cycle, she is framed as both traumatised survivor and Child of Elder Blood, suspended between psychological rupture and prophetic determinism (Sapkowski, 2009, pp. 9–10; 5–6). Witcher training at Kaer Morhen gestures toward stability, but Geralt's insistence that swordplay will help her "forget the tragedy she has lived through" hints more towards repression than closure (Sapkowski, 2009, pp. 59–60). Crucially, the novels refuse to stabilise her fate. The Thanedd coup violently destroys her fragile peace, tearing her from her home and "family" (Sapkowski, 2009, pp. 240–242). In *Baptism of Fire*, her adoption of the name "Falka" marks a further fracturing of the self – "I am Falka. But I wasn't always. Not always" (Sapkowski, 2009, p. 200). By *The Lady of the Lake*, Ciri travels across time and space, and even Geralt and Yennefer's reunion with her is relegated to the realm of myth and allegory rather than being secured in closure (Sapkowski, 2009, pp. 520–523; 545–550). Sapkowski's refusal to consolidate Ciri's story exemplifies the producerly text in Fiske's sense, as it furnishes multiple

interpretive entry points that readers can tactically appropriate (Fiske, 1989, pp. 104-105).

CDPR translates this ontological openness into a design architecture of branching narrative. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), Ciri's ultimate fate is determined by a constellation of player choices – she may become empress, take up the itinerant life of a witcher, or be lost entirely. This mechanic performs what Jenkins (2006, p. 2-3) calls the convergence of production and reception. In this case, the reader becomes a decision-maker, reworking Sapkowski's indeterminacy into ludic authorship. Naturally, this formalisation of choice also constrains interpretive play into a finite set of teleological outcomes. What in the novels is ambiguity becomes, in the game, a series of mutually exclusive destinies whose branching logic is ultimately supervised by the developer. As stated previously, this situates CDPR as “fan auteurs” (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, p. 4), reworking Sapkowski's ambiguity into a system of sanctioned possibilities – both in response to the constraints of interactive design and in ways that accrue credibility by appearing to honour fan desire for agency.

Netflix's series adopts the opposite strategy, as its global distribution logic privileges clarity over indeterminacy. In the first two seasons, Ciri's role is recast into a conventional protagonist arc, with narrative emphasis placed on her training, her adoptive bonds, and her centrality to the looming geostrategic conflict. The platform's algorithmic calculus, in designing for legibility across heterogeneous global audiences, flattens Sapkowski's fragmented mythopoesis into a recognisable “chosen one” structure. Here, the author-function becomes corporate, as what is effaced is not uncertainty, but the messiness of multiplicity in favour of industrial coherence (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, pp. 7-8).

Fans contest these divergent Ciri(s) not only through discursive practices but through direct modifications of the playable text. Modding communities have produced a significant corpus of Ciri-centric projects, some of which re-author the very structure of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. The mod *Better Call Ciri* allows players to inhabit Ciri as protagonist across a large swathe of the narrative, effectively rewriting the game's traversal grammar so that Ciri becomes the primary point of identification rather than Geralt. Similarly, *Ciri's Sole Memento* introduces a bespoke questline that expands her character arc beyond the base game's branching conclusions, demonstrating what Lévy, Farley and Lollini (2019, p. 6) term collective intelligence. In this case, distributed labour cumulatively expands the textual universe in directions neither Sapkowski nor CDPR directly authorised. Even visual and technical projects such as the “Pro Ciri” next-gen overhaul illustrate how the mod scene functions as a supplementary authorial domain, in which thousands of players co-author both the aesthetic and narrative presentation of the character.

From a theoretical perspective, these interventions crystallise the dynamics of dispersed authorship. In Jenkins' terms, they are paradigmatic instances of “textual poaching” (1992, p. 23), where the sanctioned architecture of the AAA studio becomes

raw material for vernacular re-authoring. Where Jenkins' framework accounts for the act of appropriation itself, Fiske's concept of semiotic resistance clarifies its political charge. Player-fans tactically assert interpretive priorities for Ciri, in the form of "more Ciri", "less Ciri", "different Ciri", and "playable Ciri", against both the novel's ambiguities and the game's industrial constraint. Finally, in Lévy's terms, these practices operate within a knowledge ecology where each mod leaves traces that scaffold further participatory expansion.

If Sapkowski's novels leave Ciri in narrative suspension, and modding communities have seized that ambiguity as an opportunity for vernacular authorship, CDPR's evolving governance of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* demonstrates how the institutional author-function responds by translating poaching into a manageable form of collaboration. For much of the game's lifecycle, the studio's stance on mods was permissive rather than infrastructural (CD Projekt RED, 2020). Players circulated their own toolkits and reverse-engineered frameworks, producing a lively but technically uneven ecosystem (WolvenKit, 2025). This asymmetry between grassroots demand and corporate tolerance underscores Fiske's insistence that popular culture is a site of struggle (Fiske, 1989, p. 28). In this phase, CDPR accrued the cultural capital of being perceived as 'fan-friendly' while withholding infrastructural commitment, allowing vernacular authorship to flourish without yet being absorbed into formal governance (Fiske, 1993, pp. 30-32).

As discussed previously, however, the release of the official *REDkit* modding editor in 2024 marked a shift from laissez-faire tolerance to institutionalised collaboration (CD Projekt RED, 2024). By publishing a full suite of development tools, CDPR transformed modding from a tactical breach into a sanctioned practice, enrolling fans into what Salter and Stanfill (2020, p. 4) would term an auteur-branding strategy. The studio branded itself as both corporate producer and fellow fan – an AAA company with the scale to distribute globally, but also one willing to cede parts of its world to vernacular authorship. This aligns with Jenkins' (2006, p. 3) account of convergence culture as a dynamic of top-down and bottom-up flows, but it also complicates it. Where Jenkins framed convergence as the meeting of participatory and industrial logics, CDPR actively constructed modding as part of its paratextual identity, branding participation as a feature of its "fan auteur" posture.

The cross-platform expansion of modding infrastructures further illustrates this shift. By 2025, community platforms such as mod.io began to integrate *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* projects across PC and console ecosystems (CD Projekt RED, 2025), signalling that the capacity to reauthor Ciri, Geralt, or the world itself was no longer the preserve of technical elites but had entered mainstream distribution channels. This mainstreaming blurs the boundary between "fanon" and "canon". A mod like *Better Call Ciri*, when downloaded over 50 000 times through *Nexus Mods* alone (Nexus Mods, 2025), acquires visibility and affective legitimacy comparable to that of paratexts distributed by CDPR itself. In Jenkins, Ford and Green's (2013, pp. 38-39, 195) terms, this is spreadability by infrastructural design, where circulation itself becomes a mechanism

for conferring legitimacy. Modifications are not only permitted but structured to circulate with ease across platforms and communities.

Lévy's concept of collective intelligence clarifies the epistemological stakes of this shift. In the absence of institutional support, early Witcher modders built knowledge ecologies around scattered wikis, forums, and Discord servers; each new questline or character reskin was both an intervention and a guide for future labour. With the advent of REDkit and cross-platform integration, CDPR now curates and stabilises this collective intelligence, directing it into infrastructures that both expand the text and reinforce the studio's brand. What began as tactical resistance is, in effect, naturalised into governance.

From the perspective of authorship, this is not a story of fans displacing the author but of industry recalibrating the author-function. CDPR's authorial posture is hybrid, as it retains control of the franchise's direction and canon while ceding the appearance of shared authority through modding. In Salter and Stanfill's terms, this is the paradox of the "fan auteur" – the studio is simultaneously an object of fannish devotion and an agent of corporate management. Poaching is not suppressed; it is platformed, being folded into a brand identity that accrues symbolic and economic value from its very willingness to let go.

The symmetry with Rowling's fandom conflicts clarifies the distinctive logic of dispersed authorship in the Witcher. In the Harry Potter case, as Chapter 2 established, queer and trans readers reworked the text against an over-present author whose interventions in gender politics threatened to close interpretive space (Duggan, 2021, pp. 155-157; 160-162; Salter and Stanfill, 2020, pp. 40-43, 49-50). Fan fiction, transformative readings, and even material acts such as "de-authoring" the book covers (Hansford, 2023) performed what Fiske (1993, pp. 30, 47, 137, 298) theorises as semiotic resistance – a tactical struggle to prise meaning away from Rowling's attempts at ideological closure. Participation here was structured by antagonism toward a singular, living authorial voice that claimed authority over every interpretive frontier. Conversely, Chapter 1 demonstrated that in *Game of Thrones*, antagonism often emerged not against the author, but against the gaps left by absent authorship. With Martin's novels unfinished, fans on Reddit and YouTube effectively co-authored future possibilities through speculation, pushing showrunners to service popular theories such as "Cleganebowl". Here, the crisis lay in a vacuum of authorial authority, into which fan collective intelligence flooded.

Alternatively, the Witcher distributes antagonism and appropriation across multiple nodes. Fans contest Sapkowski's disdain, CDPR's authorised branching, and Netflix's algorithmic simplification simultaneously, producing what Jenkins (2006, p. 3) describes as a convergence culture in which top-down and bottom-up flows collide without stabilising. The tactics are familiar, as we see more examples of shipping, queer rewriting, modding, and paratextual petitions, but the targets are plural. Petition campaigns to reinstate Henry Cavill or fire the Netflix writing team, which gathered

hundreds of thousands of signatures, illustrate how fandom performs sovereignty by staging referenda on corporate authorship. These acts parallel Potter boycott campaigns, but where Rowling's figure remained the focal point, here legitimacy is contested among industrial actors and their paratextual representatives (Ma, 2022; Светомиров, 2023). They also echo *Game of Thrones*'s petition to remake Season 8, where more than a million signatures attempted to overrule HBO's narrative closure. In both cases, the petition acts as an improvised referendum about the legitimacy of industrial storytelling, but while in *Game of Thrones* it targeted showrunners responding to fan-theory expectations, in the *Witcher* it splinters across the corporate field of Sapkowski, CDPR, and Netflix.

Metrics likewise function as tools of vernacular governance. AO3 ship counts for Geraskier, mod download tallies for *Better Call Ciri* or *Ciri's Sole Memento*, and Change.org petition signatures all operate as what Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, pp. 187) might term spreadable evidences, numbers that both measure and perform cultural legitimacy. In Rowling's case, these numbers stood against the author. In the *Witcher*, they circulate across platforms, redistributing authority in real time among author, studio, and streamer. In *Game of Thrones*, viewership numbers and viral meme economies functioned similarly, as "Cleganebowl confirmed" threads, YouTube reaction compilations, and even Rotten Tomatoes scores became statistical proxies for narrative legitimacy, demonstrating how quantitative traces can become pressure points in adaptation. Lévy, Farley and Lollini's (2019, pp. 6-7) framework clarifies this dynamic, as each count, tag, or download is a trace in the stigmergic field of collective intelligence, guiding subsequent creation and debate.

This contrast illuminates the mutation of the author-function in digital participatory culture. In Rowling's fandom, the author's persistence became a crisis of legitimacy. In *Game of Thrones*, absence created a void that fans colonised through theory and pressure. In the *Witcher*, legitimacy itself is dispersed and factionalised, producing what might be called polycentric resistance. Barthes' (1977, p. 148) "death of the author" does not apply in any case; instead, we see either over-presence (Rowling), absence (Martin/HBO), or dispersal (Sapkowski/CDPR/Netflix). In all, however, fans mobilise semiotic struggle to claim interpretive sovereignty. The difference lies in the shape of resistance – unilateral and oppositional in Potter; anticipatory and speculative in *Game of Thrones*; multilateral and polycentric in the *Witcher*. Together, they chart the contemporary trajectory of authorship in convergence culture, from sovereign figure, to contested antagonist, to dispersed ecology.

The *Witcher*'s value as a case study is not that it confirms the familiar obituary for authorship, but that it shows how "the author" persists as a functional principle distributed across heterogeneous sites – literary, corporate, industrial, and participatory. If *Game of Thrones* illuminated the effects of absence and Harry Potter the effects of over-presence, the *Witcher* illuminates dispersion, authorship as a circulating claim over interpretive legitimacy that is induced by Sapkowski, by CDPR, by Netflix, and by fans. This synthesis therefore revisits the key theoretical co-

ordinates of Barthes, Foucault, Jenkins, Lévy, Fiske, and Salter and Stanfill to re-specify them under conditions of networked culture and platform capitalism.

Barthes' "The Death of the Author" sought to unshackle interpretation from the sovereignty of authorial intention, insisting that "a text consists of multiple writings issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation", whose unity lies with the reader rather than the originating figure (Barthes, 1977, p. 148). Short of treating this as a historical *fait accompli*, his essay offers a normative stance for criticism, which this chapter retains, read for textual plurality rather than authorial design. Yet the digital public sphere complicates this stance on two fronts that matter directly for the Witcher. First, authorial figures have not vanished but have multiplied at the level of paratext and infrastructure, from Sapkowski's interviews and contractual disputes to CDPR's REDkit releases and Netflix's metrics-inflected publicity, such that interpretive authority is performed through industrial channels as much as through textual signatures. Secondly, readers are no longer merely the locus of interpretive collection but also agents of public circulation, with the capacity to instantiate or withdraw legitimacy by amplifying particular author-claims (e.g., elevating the fan auteur persona of CDPR or, conversely, reading Netflix's decisions as algorithmic imposition). In other words, Barthes' critical provocation remains invaluable as a check on intentionalism, but its obituary metaphor must be updated – in networked culture, authors do not die so much as proliferate, their functions redistributed across an ecology of institutions, creators, and publics (cf. Barthes, 1977, pp. 146-148).

Foucault's "author-function" offers the more adaptable frame for the Witcher. Rather than a metaphysical origin, "author" names a classificatory function that "characterise[s] the existence, circulation, and operation" of discourses by grouping texts and conferring regime-specific value (Foucault, 1979, p. 19). In this light, the Witcher universe displays a polycentric author-function. Firstly, it operates as a literary node (Sapkowski), providing heritage legitimacy and a canon-policing discourse. Secondly, it operates as an industrial/fannish node (CDPR), which confers participatory legitimacy by providing infrastructure for co-creation and positioning the studio as *one of us*. Finally, it operates as a platform node (Netflix), which confers industrial coherence by aligning commissioning, showrunning practices and global metrics into a branded promise of accessibility.

Not only do these nodes compete, but they also co-produce the conditions under which statements count as "canonical", "faithful", or "inauthentic". The author-function thus appears as a bundle of permissions and constraints that different actors leverage to their own ends – Sapkowski to delimit "canon", CDPR to legitimise fan-led expansion, and Netflix to render adaptation legible to a global audience. What the Witcher adds to Foucault is the visibility of distribution across platforms. The function is not only socio-discursive but socio-technical, travelling through contractual frameworks, modding toolkits, recommendation dashboards, and paratextual publicity.

The result is a contested grid of author-functions whose alignments and frictions structure reception.

As established earlier, Jenkins' early account of fandom rejected the caricature of the passive consumer by showing that fans operate as active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meaning. In *Textual Poachers*, he describes this practice as appropriative labour, whereby interpretive communities extract and repurpose elements of mass culture to serve their own affective and ideological projects (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23). In *Convergence Culture*, this appropriation is situated within a transformed media ecology where "old and new media collide" and where "the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). The emphasis shifts from the sovereignty of individual texts or authors to the dynamics of circulation, where meaning emerges through negotiated exchanges between corporate and grassroots agents.

Within the *Witcher* franchise, Jenkins' framework clarifies why authorship appears polycentric rather than singular. CDPR acts as an intermediary between Sapkowski's novels, player communities, and industry structures, organising infrastructures such as the REDkit modding tools and GOG distribution platform. These infrastructures transform interpretive labour into publicly legible authorship claims, allowing players and modders to participate in expanding the *Witcher* universe. In Jenkins' terms, CDPR converts "textual poaching" into sanctioned practice, while simultaneously governing its boundaries through corporate authorship.

These dynamics of circulation are most clearly theorised through Jenkins, Ford and Green's concept of spreadability, established earlier in this chapter. In the *Witcher*, CDPR's participatory ethos enabled fan-made expansions and modifications to gain visibility, but the studio ultimately maintained the authority to demarcate canon. Netflix, by contrast, designed for spreadability through algorithmic promotion, paratextual interviews, and global distribution strategies, but struggled to secure interpretive legitimacy among audiences sceptical of platform logics. Jenkins' framework demonstrates that in both cases, authorship is structured by circulation. Those actors who control the terms of circulation, or appear to validate it, accrue authorial authority.

Where Jenkins accounts for the circulation of meaning, Lévy's concept of collective intelligence clarifies how that meaning is iteratively produced within networked publics. Applied to the *Witcher*, this framework explains why disputes over canon, the proliferation of mods, and the iterative reframing of Ciri across media do not remain isolated skirmishes but sediment into a wider knowledge ecology, reshaping how authority is recognised and contested over time.

Two consequences follow. First, the centre of interpretive authority can shift within a franchise ecology as particular contributions gain traction. A widely adopted fan-mod, a viral meme, or a popular reinterpretation of a character may become stabilised as "authentic" within community discourse, even when lacking official sanction. Second, institutional actors can amplify or suppress this ecology by shaping the affordances

available to publics. CDPR's relatively open modding ecosystem encouraged stigmergic elaboration, allowing fans to generate quests, retextures, and expanded storylines that collectively sustained the games' cultural vitality. Alternatively, Netflix offered fewer participatory openings, leaving its adaptive strategies exposed to critique and encouraging audiences to mobilise collective intelligence against its perceived algorithmic logic.

Following Fiske, popular culture in the *Witcher* can be read as a site of ideological struggle emerging from these participatory conditions, in which audiences tactically appropriate and redeploy textual meanings within and against institutional frameworks. In this case, that struggle becomes visible in how fans appropriate and transform the franchise's meanings against the grain of official authorship. Queer and trans fans, for example, have long reconfigured characters such as Ciri or Yennefer in fan fiction and mods to insert representational possibilities absent from both Sapkowski's novels and early CDPR adaptations. These practices mirror what Fiske describes as the tactical use of cultural resources, producing texts that can be simultaneously commercial commodities and instruments of identity work or resistance (Fiske, 1993, pp. 22-23). In this light, the discursive struggles over race and representation in Netflix's series can be read not only as backlash but also as evidence of the franchise's "producerly" openness, which enables competing appropriations across ideological positions. What matters is less the stability of canonical meaning than the contestation itself, which constitutes the lived reality of participatory culture.

CDPR's cultivation of its reputation as a "fan-friendly" studio exemplifies how this contest over legitimacy is managed institutionally, as authorship becomes a matter of branding as much as creative control. By presenting itself as both a professional AAA developer and a devoted custodian of Sapkowski's world, CDPR positioned itself as a collective fan auteur, garnering legitimacy through its openness to modding and through paratexts such as developer diaries, community updates, and its distribution platform GOG. Conversely, showrunner Lauren Schmidt Hissrich became the branded auteur-figure for Netflix's adaptation, functioning less as an individual creative voice than as a corporate-facing brand of authorship, tethered to metrics, publicity appearances, and platform promotion. In both cases, authorship functions less as creative authority and more as brand management, where influence is secured through the careful negotiation of industrial and fannish expectations.

Barthes' declaration of the "death of the author" sought to decentre authorial sovereignty, but the *Witcher's* case demonstrates that authorship has instead proliferated across multiple nodes. These nodes are structured through classificatory author-functions (Foucault, 1979, p. 19), sustained through circulation and collective intelligence (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 3, 27; Lévy, 2019, p. 6), contested through fan resistance (Fiske, 1993, p. 11), and increasingly managed through branded performances of authorship within transmedia ecologies (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, pp. 2–5).

Together, these perspectives illuminate the *Witcher* as a paradigmatic example of polycentric authorship. Authority is contested; it accrues through circulation, collaboration, resistance, and branding. Sapkowski's claims to literary legitimacy, CDPR's cultivation of participatory infrastructures, Netflix's algorithmically inflected industrial authorship, and the tactical interventions of fans all operate as overlapping author-functions within a dispersed ecology. The case thus exemplifies how authorship in digital culture is neither dead nor singular, but an unstable assemblage of functions, performances, and negotiations.

The three case studies examined across this dissertation illustrate distinct modalities of authorship in the age of participatory digital culture. *Game of Thrones* demonstrates the consequences of an authorial vacuum, in which the incompleteness of George R.R. Martin's novels produced a gap in narrative authority that networked audiences attempted to fill through predictive and speculative practices. Conversely, Harry Potter exemplifies the risks of authorial over-presence, as J.K. Rowling's sustained paratextual interventions reasserted ideological authority in ways that fractured fan communities and transformed participatory spaces into sites of conflict.

The *Witcher*, however, represents a third and qualitatively different model based in polycentric dispersion. Rather than absence or over-presence, authorship here proliferates across multiple sites, including Sapkowski's literary canon, CDPR's participatory game design, Netflix's globally oriented, algorithmically mediated adaptation strategies, and fan-led reworkings. Together, these sites produce an ecology in which authorial authority is distributed, contested, and continually recalibrated rather than anchored in a single controlling figure.

Placed in sequence, the three cases chart a trajectory in contemporary media authorship, moving from absence (*Game of Thrones*) to over-presence (Harry Potter) to dispersion (the *Witcher*). This trajectory reveals not the "death" of the author envisaged by Barthes, but its mutation and multiplication. The author persists as a contested function spread across industrial, literary, and participatory domains. Foucault's classificatory author-function, Jenkins' convergence culture, Lévy's collective intelligence, Fiske's semiotic struggle, and Salter and Stanfill's fan auteur collectively underscore this transformation. In digital culture, authorship is not abolished but reconstituted as a networked, distributed practice – a site of struggle in which power, legitimacy, and meaning are negotiated across competing actors and platforms.

CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION: REWRITING AUTHORITY IN AN AGE OF PARTICIPATION

My conceptualisation of this dissertation emerged from a paradox I found to be increasingly visible within contemporary media culture: at the very historical moment when poststructural theory displaced the author as the sovereign origin of meaning, digital communication infrastructures rendered authorship newly visible and newly contested. Barthes' insistence that the unity of a text lies not in its origin but in its destination destabilised the authority of authorial intention at the level of theory (Barthes, 1977, p. 148). Foucault's author-function reframed the author not as expressive subject but as classificatory and regulatory principle within discourse (Foucault, 1979, p. 19). Yet neither theorist could have fully anticipated the communicative environment in which these theoretical displacements would become materially operative. Networked digital media have not only illustrated the "death of the author"; they have operationalised it, transforming interpretive struggle into a structurally embedded feature of cultural production.

The distributed, contested authorship traced throughout this study is not simply an ideological shift in reading practice – it is infrastructurally enabled. Near-instant communication, persistent digital archives, algorithmic amplification, meme circulation, scalable community formation, and the capacity for asynchronous, distributed collaboration have reshaped the conditions under which texts are able to circulate and be evaluated. The contemporary internet's many-to-many architecture – described by Lévy as enabling a "collective intelligence" in which knowledge is distributed across connected participants (Lévy, Farley and Lollini, 2019, pp. 5-6) – has transformed interpretive labour from a largely private act into a publicly archived and collectively negotiated process. Meaning-making is no longer limited by concrete constraints such as location, proximity, time, and institutional gatekeepers like publishers and editors; it accumulates visibly, generating discursive ecologies within which authors, institutions, and audiences interact in real time. This visibility also compresses temporality. Networked discourse frequently consolidates within what might be termed discursive windows: periods of intensified engagement that emerge immediately following release and rarely sustain equivalent intensity over extended durations. During these windows, communication spikes and interpretive labour proliferates, such that meaning stabilisation occurs under accelerated conditions. Distributed authorship therefore unfolds not only across expanded communities but within temporally bounded cycles of visibility, where authority is negotiated rapidly before collective attention disperses.

Under these conditions, participatory culture as theorised by Jenkins, ceases to be peripheral or subcultural (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 2-3). It becomes infrastructural to both production and reception. Convergence culture does not only describe media content flowing across platforms; it describes a system in which circulation depends upon audience engagement, where spreadability becomes a precondition of visibility (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, p. 7). Interpretive acts – whether

speculative theories, critical essays, memes, redesign proposals, or transformative works – are not epiphenomenal. They contribute to the discursive environment within which texts are interrogated, stabilised, contested, or reconfigured. Authorship, accordingly, becomes inseparable from the infrastructural dynamics that amplify or constrain these participatory interventions.

Across the three case studies examined here, distinct modalities of authorship emerge under these digital conditions. In *Game of Thrones*, authorial absence generated a narrative vacuum that networked communities filled through predictive modelling, collaborative theorising, and iterative reinterpretation. The lack of narrative completion catalysed a distributed epistemology. Speculation became collective labour. The text's openness enabled the consolidation of interpretive authority within networked publics, demonstrating how infrastructural affordances, such as searchable archives, collaborative forums, provocative touchstones, and instantaneous circulation, allow distributed cognition to flourish at scale (Lévy, 1997, pp. 13-14).

In Harry Potter, the dynamic was inverted. Authorial over-presence, manifested through sustained paratextual intervention and public ideological positioning, intensified rather than stabilised the author-function (Foucault, 1979, p. 19). The visibility afforded by digital platforms transformed disagreement into large-scale contestation. Here, Jenkins' participatory model intersects with Fiske's conception of semiotic democracy (Jenkins, 2006, p. 22; Fiske, 1989, p. 20): audiences did more than simply reinterpreting texts; they mobilised collectively to challenge authorial legitimacy. Duggan's account of queer and trans reader response underscores the affective stakes of this struggle, where interpretation becomes inseparable from identity and community belonging (Duggan, 2017, p. 156). The author-function persists as an embattled claim rather than a stable point of origin (Foucault, 1979, p. 19). The internet does not silence the author; it exposes the author to an unprecedented scale of interpretive resistance.

The Witcher illustrates yet another configuration of authorial authority, in the form of polycentric dispersion. Literary origin, game development, streaming adaptation, and modding communities coexist as competing centres of narrative authority. Salter and Stanfill's "fan auteur" becomes particularly instructive here (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, p. 4). Creators must perform authenticity within participatory communities while operating within corporate structures to earn recognition from fanbases (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, p. 5). Authorship circulates between institutional power and communal identification, generating unstable equilibria. Dispersion fragments and redistributes authority across visible nodes of production and reception. Under platform capitalism, authorship becomes both performance and negotiation, enacted within infrastructures that reward visibility, engagement, and alignment with networked expectations.

All told, these configurations demonstrate that authorship in digital culture operates as neither sovereign intention nor as evacuated position. It persists as a regulatory and performative claim over meaning whose legitimacy is infrastructurally contingent

(Foucault, 1979, p. 19). Participation does not dissolve hierarchy; it redistributes it unevenly (Fiske, 1989, p. 20; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, pp. 189-190). Convergence culture foregrounds the interaction between producer and consumer (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3), intensifying the visibility of interpretive struggle. Spreadability does not democratise authority without friction; it accelerates contestation (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, p. 236). Authorship becomes provisional – a claim sustained only insofar as it withstands collective scrutiny within digitally mediated publics.

Crucially, the phenomenon documented here depends upon specific infrastructural affordances. The scale and intensity of distributed authorship could not exist without the internet's capacity to facilitate rapid communication, archive discourse persistently, allow for organisation on massive scales, and algorithmically amplify particular narratives (Lévy, 1997, pp. 13-14; Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). The formation of affinity communities of immense size, capable of organising labour, distributing interpretive tasks, and coordinating critique, represents a qualitative transformation from earlier modes of fan correspondence or mediated feedback. Alternate reality games, for example, rely explicitly upon distributed cognition: puzzles intentionally unsolvable by individuals become tractable through networked collaboration (Lévy, 1997, p. 13-14). Similarly, fan rewrites of contested narrative outcomes, redesign proposals circulated at scale, and meme-driven reinterpretations depend upon the frictionless aggregation of creative labour. The dynamics traced in this dissertation are therefore inseparable from the material conditions of digital connectivity.

The broader media landscape offers multiple illustrations of this structural condition. Franchise instability within the Star Wars sequel trilogy reveals the volatility that can arise when dispersed interpretive authority collides with corporate production cycles. Conversely, the redesign of the Sonic the Hedgehog film character following immediate and widespread digital backlash demonstrates the productive potential of distributed labour. In one instance, networked contestation contributed to fragmentation; in another, it enabled iterative correction and commercial success. Both examples indicate that authorship under platform conditions is structurally responsive to visible collective reaction. Neither can be reduced to simplistic narratives of capitulation or empowerment; rather, they illustrate the precarious negotiation between industrial control and participatory expectation that characterises contemporary cultural production.

The redistribution of authority traced here is not confined to interpretation. Parallel developments in crowdsourced production models extend participatory logics into the economic foundations of creative industries. Platforms enabling collective funding displace elements of traditional gatekeeping, rendering the viability of projects contingent upon networked endorsement rather than institutional patronage. In such contexts, audiences pre-authorise production through aggregated micro-investment, assuming forms of economic stakeholding that complicate the distinction between consumer and producer. While distinct from collaborative authorship in the interpretive sense examined in this study, crowdsourced production reflects the same

infrastructural conditions – scalable coordination, persistent digital memory, rapid circulation, and algorithmically mediated visibility – that enable distributed meaning-making. Authorship thus becomes not only interpretively negotiated but economically contingent upon networked publics. The shift from institutional patronage to distributed endorsement marks an extension of participatory logics from discourse into capital. These developments suggest that distributed authorship may be symptomatic of a broader reconfiguration of cultural production under digital capitalism. Yet the stability of these conditions cannot be assumed. The same infrastructures that enabled participatory consolidation are increasingly subject to regulatory intervention, platform centralisation, algorithmic opacity, and the proliferation of automated agents. If the visibility of interpretive labour depends upon open communication channels and accessible archives, then restrictions upon those channels alter the conditions of authorship itself. Emerging anxieties concerning bot-saturated discourse, manipulated visibility, increased institutional scrutiny, and the erosion of trust within digital publics raise the possibility that the phase of distributed authorship documented here may quickly become historically situated. The “open internet” conditions that facilitated large-scale, organic interpretive collaboration are neither immutable nor guaranteed.

Moreover, the rapid development and integration of generative artificial intelligence into creative industries introduces a further destabilising factor. AI-mediated production is no longer speculative; algorithmic systems are increasingly deployed within design, scripting, visual development, and marketing pipelines, while audiences have begun to frame perceived creative stagnation or formulaic output in explicitly algorithmic terms. If participatory readership redistributed interpretive authority (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3; Fiske, 1989, p. 20), AI-assisted production redistributes creative generation itself. When machine systems produce derivative or transformative works at scale, the boundaries between origin, interpretation, adaptation, and iteration become increasingly porous (Barthes, 1977, p. 146-147). The negotiation between author, institution, and audience is thus entangled with non-human agents whose outputs circulate within the same infrastructures of spreadability and critique. While this study has not undertaken sustained analysis of AI authorship, its findings suggest that the author-function will continue to mutate under these conditions (Foucault, 1979, p. 19). The question will not be whether authorship disappears, but how legitimacy, accountability, and stabilisation are reconfigured when creative production itself becomes distributed across human and machine systems.

My present research, while extensive, remains bounded by its corpus and context. By focusing primarily on Anglophone fantasy franchises operating within particular industrial frameworks, this study has mapped one prominent manifestation of distributed authorship under digital conditions. It has not exhaustively examined non-Western participatory cultures, alternative platform architectures, or empirical ethnographies of community practice. Future research might extend this framework comparatively, tracing how dispersed authorship functions within distinct regulatory regimes or under divergent cultural logics. Empirical investigation into algorithmic

governance, digital labour economies, or community organisation would further clarify the infrastructural forces shaping contemporary authorship. The phenomena of crowdsourced capital, AI-mediated production, and platform regulation all suggest avenues through which the negotiation of authority may evolve in unpredictable directions.

While this study has drawn selectively on adaptation theory, it has not treated adaptation as a primary explanatory framework. Medium-specific considerations, including narrative compression and broader processes of transmedia reconfiguration, remain important for understanding how texts are reshaped across platforms. However, the analyses presented here suggest that such factors alone appear insufficient to fully account for the most significant points of divergence identified in the case studies. Instead, these divergences become more fully legible when situated within the dynamics of participatory culture, where fan expectations, industrial pressures, and distributed interpretive practices intersect. A more sustained engagement with adaptation theory – particularly in relation to franchises such as *Harry Potter*, where medium transition and paratextual expansion are more closely intertwined – would provide a productive avenue for further research.

If there is a central conclusion to be drawn from this study, it is that the “death of the author” was less an erasure than a displacement whose full consequences have only relatively recently become legible in networked culture (Barthes, 1977, p. 148). Authorship persists as function, as Foucault argued, but its operation is now transparent, accelerated, and contested at scale (Foucault, 1979, p. 19). Participation, as Jenkins theorised, is no longer marginal but infrastructural to both circulation and legitimacy (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 2-3). Semiotic struggle, in Fiske’s sense, unfolds within algorithmically mediated publics rather than isolated subcultures (Fiske, 1989, p. 20). And the figure of the fan auteur, articulated by Salter and Stanfill, epitomises the unstable synthesis of industrial authority and communal identification that defines this moment (Salter and Stanfill, 2020, p. 4).

The author does not vanish from contemporary storytelling. Nor do they retain uncontested sovereignty. Instead, authorship becomes provisional – a visible claim over meaning negotiated within digital ecologies of discourse, capital, visibility, and legitimacy. The struggle over texts becomes a struggle over stabilisation itself. In an era defined by scalable communication, participatory coordination, and infrastructural acceleration, authority is neither singular nor secure. It is perpetually negotiated, publicly performed, and contingently sustained.

The question that remains is not whether authors control meaning, but under what conditions meaning can be stabilised at all. If digital infrastructures continue to evolve – through regulation, automation, economic redistribution, or algorithmic transformation – the dynamics traced here will mutate accordingly. Yet the insight endures: authorship in the digital age is neither sovereign nor obsolete. It is the visible

trace of an ongoing negotiation between origin, institution, audience, and infrastructure
– a negotiation that defines the cultural politics of storytelling in networked modernity.

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