# Reconfiguring the Twenty-First-Century Reader

## An Analysis of Interpretation and Performance

*Giuliana Fenech*

**Abstract:**

This article discusses how contemporary technological trends and new media have reconfigured the reader into a multiplicity of roles, suggesting that a number of dualisms formerly associated with the act of reading are no longer valid. Notions of writing and reading, creation and interpretation have been adapted to new convergence models of textual production and reception, and whilst 'story' remains translatable across media, in the process of multiplatforming, various narrative techniques are used to create different levels of engagement with the text at each stage. The promise of the reader's much-celebrated creative authority at the turn of the century is problematised here through a discussion of distributed aesthetics and tele-theories of representation. Taking the fantasy genre as a case study, the contemporary influence of cultish trends, together with the effect of cybernetic communication dynamics on traditional genre stylistics and the fulfilment of narrative meaning, will be analysed as essential considerations in establishing which aspects of the traditional reader are translatable to a future that seems increasingly dependent on connectivity, interactivity and speed. The article will argue that, in a number of instances, the contemporary cultural scenario suggests that fulfilment of meaning is often successfully executed through strategies previously associated with the performative rather than the literary text, and will conclude that specific technological developments are responsible for this adaptation.

**KEYWORDS:** *remediation, convergence, multiplatform storytelling, distributed narrative, cult fiction*

As technology swiftly modifies the contemporary media landscape, new degrees of interactivity, participation and incorporation come into play in the

creation of stories that are produced for multiple media formats such as books, films, video games and interactive websites, amongst others. The relationship between story and reader is altered and the role of the author reconfigured to suit new cultural, creative contexts as well as commercial and industrial ones. This article will discuss how contemporary technological trends and new media have reconfigured the reader into a multiplicity of roles, suggesting that a number of dualisms formerly associated with the act of reading are no longer valid. Notions of writing and reading, creation and interpretation have been adapted to new models of textual production / reception and whilst 'story' remains translatable across media, in the process of multiplatforming, various narrative techniques are used to create different levels of engagement with the text at each stage. The story, often born in book form, takes its place as one loop within a chain of story versions; print versions, filmic versions, ludic versions, hypertextual versions, so that through a phenomenon that Henry Jenkins labels 'convergence', as discussed below, story is distributed through different places at the same time.[1] Within this context of multimedia appropriation, story becomes:

[...] independent of the techniques that bear it along. It may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties: the subject of a story may serve as argument for a ballet; that of a novel can be transposed to stage or screen, one can recount in words a film to someone who has not seen it. These are words we read, images we see, gestures we decipher, but through them, it is a story that we follow; and it could be the same story.[2]

In this environment, readers develop a long-term relationship with the story as they are transformed into hunters and gatherers, actively searching for meaning rather than passively receiving it. The fostering of a participatory culture contradicts, as shall be discussed further on, the traditional notion of the positioning of the reader, because in the new media environment, the reader is not fixedly placed in any position but, rather, is encouraged to navigate the story space so that each reader constructs their 'own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives'.[3]

As the techniques for interpreting story move towards more personal approaches that are facilitated by digital fandom, the contemporary influence of cultish trends on the nature of the story and the way it is received becomes an interesting negotiation between mainstream and grassroots' claim over the creative sphere and interpretation.[4] The fulfilment of narrative meaning will be analysed as an essential consideration in establishing which aspects of

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1   Notes: For more about the convergence phenomenon please see: Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York University, 2006).

2   Claude Bremond in Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 2006), p.1.

3   Jenkins, pp.3-4.

4   For more on cultish trends and their influence on the consumption of narrative please see: Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (Oxford: Routledge, 2002).

the traditional reader are translatable to the future. As the contemporary cultural scenario suggests, fulfilment of meaning is often successfully executed through strategies previously associated with the performative, rather than the literary text. Ultimately, specific technological developments, such as the mainstream proliferation of the internet in the mid-nineties, are responsible for this adaptation. In line with my interest in children's literature, The Harry Potter series (1995 – 2005) will be taken here as a case study for analysis.

## Multimodality, Narrativity and Form

Traditionally, literature tends to treat the types of narration exemplified by novels, short stories, news, history, and conversational storytelling as the unmarked, standard manifestation of narrativity – telling somebody else that something happened, with the assumption that the addressee is not already aware of the events. Not only was story expected to be linear and chronological but even the way in which it was told was different to contemporary methods, primarily because language was considered to be, 'the central and only full means for representation and communication, and [...] even though multiplicities of modes of representation were recognized, in each instance representation was treated as monomodal: discrete, bounded, autonomous, with its own practices, traditions, professions, habits'.[5] Both the production and the creation of story were private, personal acts of creation and interpretation and the parameters of the narrative were closed in, shutting down the possibility of creative intrusion on behalf of the readers. However, both Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong predicted that the advent of the electric way of moving information would create a cultural turning point. Electronic technology would challenge the supremacy of print and the authority of the author as a channel of mass communication with an omniscient point of view, and would open an alternative to the linear mode of thinking associated with writing. Furthermore, by the late 1980s, talk media, namely telephone, radio and television, had been supplanted, in terms of novelty, by the digital way of moving information. Reversing the trend observed by McLuhan and Ong, the development of computer networks meant, to some extent, a secondary literacy. Being literate no longer merely required the reader to be able to read and write, but also having the know-how to use e-mail, Internet chatrooms and the World Wide Web, all of which now contend with the telephone, radio, or TV for both personal contacts and as a way to keep informed of current events.[6] Apart from complementing television in the way it made narrative more easily accessible, the advent of digital technology in the form of computers also introduced the notion of the hypertext.

Although the notion behind hypertext is not new and has been used in

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5  Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication* (London: Arnold, 2001), p. 45.

6  For more about new media literacy please see Gunther Kress, *Literacy in the New Media Age* (Oxford: Routledge, 2003).

literature to signify literary works characterized by an immense depth of allusion, there are major differences implicated in the position of the reader when engaging with these two kinds of hypertextuality. The reader of a literary work understands the depth of allusion through intertextual affiliations to traditions that have been acquired through dedicated study. Readers of computer-generated hypertexts, on the other hand, do not need to possess literary baggage, as cyberspace encourages them to participate in the creation of narrative meaning whilst allowing them to access a wealth of information through a simple click on their personal PC. Readers are invited to navigate the story space, as discussed below in the context of fandom. The interpretation of story thus becomes part of a process in which readers are encouraged to become part of a long social conversation with both the narrative, as well as the like-minded community of readers that begins to form around its edges – a dynamic that was encouraged by the convergence phenomenon that took place from the mid-1990s till around 2010. This phenomenon was, according to Jenkins, both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process that encouraged mainstream production houses to cater for the participation of the grassroots community through the creation of a digital fandom so that, by the turn of the century, convergence came to stand for 'the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.'[7] It was a new dynamic that represented a cultural shift in which the artistic value of story is balanced against its entertainment value and both are pitched against a culture of visibility and recognition of authors and readers alike. Often termed fans, readers who participate vociferously in the interpretation of story, publishing their views and discussing the narrative world, are thus able to combine creative work with their affective relationship with the story, as discussed in the following section.

### The Work and Play of Fans

Fandom, as a dynamic related to wider shifts within consumer culture, gained an important place in the multimedia chains surrounding cultural activators such as Harry Potter. And yet, in what ways may digitalisation be said to have changed the dynamic of fandom? Partly, it equipped readers with more power to intrude on textual meaning by encouraging alternative readings of the story rather than shutting them down to a subscribed version dictated by the production teams behind each of the other media. Engaging in fandom allows readers to critique mainstream texts, providing the opportunity for them to comment on the world from the inside out. Readers are able to join a literary critical community that discusses stories in a celebratory fashion whilst allowing an element of resistance and subversion to creep in. Fans are also readers who acknowledge themselves as consumers of the story, buying into

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7   Jenkins, p. 2.

the world not only on a commercial level but also emotionally and ideologically. They are the self-pronounced experts on narrative elements of setting, plot and character and they exert their creative power over grassroots interpretations of the story, creating a homogeneous response to the story, thus awarding it cultural capital. The power of the reader in fandom is thus the ability to operate outside of the commercial structures in spite of the pressure to operate from within, and this power is translated into the reconfiguration of the passive reader into multiple roles at the same time so that, as Lev Grossman has claimed, 'We didn't just watch, we also worked. Like crazy. We made Facebook profiles and Second Life avatars and reviewed books at Amazon and recorded podcasts. We blogged [...] and wrote songs [...] we camcorded [...] and built open-source software.'[8] Reader activity at the time therefore came to suggest a more intense kind of engagement with story that results in creative material, featuring characters that have previously appeared in works whose copyright is held by others, because this is also what partly distinguishes between amateurs and professionals, fans from specialists.[9] The story, now a distributed one, was subject to the logic of distributed aesthetics, which is concerned with the mobilisation of networks and the creation of lines of connectivity, as discussed in further detail below – the Harry Potter experience itself became to readers an assemblage rather than simply a book, a film or a game.

It is essential to note that although, in many ways, the Harry Potter fandom echoed others that came before it, such as those that developed around The Lord of the Rings and Star Trek, it was also different because whereas the first two had to transition from a zine culture to the internet, the Harry Potter fandom grew directly online, and this affected readers' relationship with the story and their reconfiguration. The promises made to the reader by the media corporations behind its production were different too, as, promising the reader creative power over the world of story, the HP brand creators tapped into the fact that the internet was still a new platform of delivery in the mid-nineties and readers were still naive about its limitations.[10]

Previously – that is, before the early 1990s – fandom took place almost exclusively through one-on-one interactions and face-to-face meetings. Fans got together at conventions and eventually began to write newsletters, zines and APAS (amateur press association additions to newsletters). Fan artefacts were physical, and geographical boundaries restrictive.[11] Cyberspace, however, changed the dynamic through its connectivity, immediacy and hyper-

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8  To read more please see: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570810,00.html#ixzz1vOyrOeCv>.

9  See Hills, p. 27.

10  To read more about the restrictions placed on fan creativity please view <http://fanlore.org/wiki/Pornish_Pixies>. A site containing a particularly large explicit HP fanworks community that got targeted for shutdowns as well as <http://www.sugarquill.net/>. A popular site with stringent beta and content controls.

11  For more on the history of fandom please see: Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, eds., *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006).

mediacy. Suddenly fandom became a space accessible on a daily level to all those with Internet access. In cyberspace, readers could socialise and discuss or explore aspects of the story that caught their interest. Reading became a collective experience because readers were able to make connections, express opinions about the narrative, appropriate cultural references, share and evaluate the ethics of the story and circulate their interpretation of the fictional realm as a way of understanding themselves better, as demonstrated through the examples presented here. Technology allowed readers to spend prolonged time interacting with the narrative world and, through the cyberspace loop in the media landscape, readers of the Harry Potter series were able to exert a creative force of their own on the narrative world. Whilst the extent of this creative force is problematised by various critics such as Carmen Hermosillo, John Fiske in his 1992 study *The Cultural Economy of Fandom*, alludes to an important concept of 'semiotic' and 'enunciative' productivity in which reading a text and talking about it, the activity most central to fandom practices, are suddenly categorised as productive activities because they allow exchange cultures to flourish, and this in turn empowers the reader through a more personal and therefore meaningful engagement with the text.[12] This is an interesting proposition and one that greatly validates fan activities, because the question of how valuable the conversation surrounding the story is becomes a crucial one in establishing whether it possesses creative impetus or whether, in actual fact, all that is really taking place is that the tainted and derogative term *consumption* is replaced by *production*.

As cyberspace allowed fandom to gain power, publishing and production houses became aware that for a story to enter popular consciousness, it had to sustain a brand community that allows the active, emotionally engaged and socially networked reader to 'buy into a prolonged relationship with a particular narrative universe, which is rich enough and complex enough to sustain their interest over time and thus motivate a succession of consumer choices'.[13] The consumption of the story was encouraged as readers were invited to read, view, play and interact with a story on a regular basis making use of particular modes: 'Print and radio tell; stage and film show; cyberspace embodies [...] Whereas the playwright and the filmmaker both try to communicate the idea of an experience, the spacemaker tries to communicate the experience itself [...] Thus the spacemaker can never hope to communicate a particular reality, but only to set up opportunities for certain kinds of realities to emerge.'[14] Fandom celebrates these opportunities by offering a niche market in economic and cultural parameters in which fans' values and ideologies are sold back to them, blurring the boundaries between work and play through the figure of

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12  For more on Carmen Hermosillo please see <http://alphavilleherald.com/2004/05/introducing_hum.html>. [accessed 1st June 2012]. For more on the cultural economy of fandom please refer to John Fiske, 'The Cultural Economy of Fandom', in Lewis, L.A. (ed.) *The Adoring Audience*, (London: Routledge, 1992) pp. 37-39.

13  Jenkins, p. 284.

14  Randall Walser, 'Spacemakers and the Art of Cyberspace Playhouse.' *Mondo 2000*, no. 2 (Summer 1990) pp. 60-61.

the *professionalised fan* who revisits favourite textual structures and moments 'reactivating these in cultural practices of play' and performance as demonstrated and discussed further in the examples of textual analysis below.[15]

The importance of play and performance must be understood better, especially in their interplay with the process of reading. When readers' collective input becomes integral to the consumption process of the text, the communication model that supports linear, chronological narrative – that is, the author-text-reader structure discussed above – is subverted, as the author's omniscient control over the story world is challenged and the text becomes a site of mediation. But to what extent is the master narrative negotiated? Reading within fandom ultimately becomes a *dialectic of value*, as fans identify moments inside the world that they relate to on an affective level, and then appropriate internally through conversation and performance.[16] The individual response of the reader is negotiated in a collective environment that encourages non-competitive and affective play, so that fandom is established as both a product of subjective processes – including fans' personal attachment to the text – as well as objective processes like the text's exchange value within wider cultural contexts. Ultimately, returning to the question of consumption as opposed to productivity, this article posits that fan cultures are both found and created, and that readers' input is neither completely subsumed nor exalted but, is playfully negotiated through various modes of interpretation that lead to what has been termed the *cult-ification* of narrative: the appropriation of mainstream narrative by grassroots influences that re-interpret and therefore arguably re-create aspects of the master narrative to suit their own ideological and creative agendas. This is possible because fans are readers who pay closer attention to the text than most, often adopting ideals and beliefs which they can associate with, reflecting their alliances through writing, painting or singing about them and then sharing these creative activities with other like-minded community members, as can be seen through the dynamic at play in the section called The Magic Quill on *mugglenet.com*, one of the most established and well-known Harry Potter fan sites. A closer look at case study examples is necessary at this juncture.

### Fan Fiction: mugglenet.com

In his 1995 book, *The Digital Economy: Promise and Peril in the Age of Networked Intelligence*, Don Tapscott classifies contemporary readers as 'prosumers' because of their dual function of producing and consuming a text, a process that played down or made irrelevant individual authorship and encouraged readers to exert an influence on the nature of the narratives with which they interacted instead of merely using story as a reflection of their

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15   See Hills, pp. 40-41.
16   Hills, p. 90.

own lives and identities.[17] A good example of this can be found on fan websites related to popular texts, for example, *Mugglenet* – associated with the Harry Potter series – and The Magic Quill section on *Mugglenet*.[18]

The Magic Quill is found in the Discussion section, in World Famous Editorials, yet it functions in a very different way to those editorials that are mostly critical, or to opinion pieces about canon texts. Upon clicking on The Magic Quill, the reader is told that this is an interactive fan fiction column to which 'you' can contribute in order to 'inspire the next original tale of wizardry', thus placing the focus on the intrusive agency afforded to the reader through the internet. Begun in 2004, this column features regular instalments or chapters written by *Robbie*. Readers were asked to submit their story ideas through the Mugglenet feedback system in no more than 150 words which Robbie would transform into an instalment that was posted within this section. At that point, readers could read and also comment on the instalment, so that their participation in the interpretation of narrative became public as opposed to private, and active as opposed to passive. By the time the column reached chapter 73, the format had somewhat changed. Instead of submitting general, random ideas, readers were asked to submit answers to specific survey and contest questions via the Chamber of Secrets forums; later this changed once again and currently readers are asked to submit comments in The Magic Quill blog, although the previous two methods are still also in use. Invitations of this kind clearly allow for non-linear, non-chronological reading, as readers can read selectively through the easily available archive, can read in sequence sticking to Magic Quill instalments, or can also stop to browse the comments on the instalments submitted by the readers of the instalments.

Yet how does The Magic Quill allow readers to exert a creative force on the nature of the story and how does this affect their engagement with the story world? Furthermore, how does the personalization of the story through fandom affect the production of the source story itself and the readers' reconfiguration? The Magic Quill plot lines are set in a world that inhabits the borderline spaces of Hogwarts in the Harry Potter universe. Hog's Head, Gingotts and Godric's Hollow are mentioned – amongst others – but little time is spent developing place, as it is assumed that the reader of The Magic Quill is familiar with the source story. Consistent representation of the story world is sufficient to make this version successful in terms of place. The plot lines refer to important moments in the master narrative such as the birth of Harry (#2, #40, #41, #44) and the passing away of a great man (#60), but these function more as side events rather than formative elements that mould the direction of the story. The plot serves to provide readers with a moment by moment reenactment of the narrative, so in order to facilitate the reader's

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17 Don Tapscott, *The Digital Economy: Promise and Peril in the Age of Networked Intelligence* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1995).
18 Refer to <http://www.mugglenet.com/editorials/themagicquill/tmq1.shtml>. [accessed on 15/06/2012].

engagement with the story, the structural framework of the Quill echoes that of many fairy tale collections such as that of *The Arabian Nights*, in which a set of stories are linked together through the context of their telling. Traditionally, the context has involved a storytelling persona or series of them; in this case, four characters are sitting round a table in Hog's Head whilst outside the snow swirls and the cold wind makes travellers shudder. Whilst Hog's Head is a symbol readers would recognize and picture, the characters are original to the column. A veiled witch named Sadie, an invisible witch and wizard named Endora and Merlin and a hooded stranger named Spanky exchange stories that reflect the choices readers have made along the way, as discussed below. The first episode begins with a story set on a night in December and it is called 'The Gifts of the Animagi'. The link to the source Harry Potter story is immediately established as Endora asks:

> 'Is it about 'Arry Potter?' said Endora's eager, and rather mannish, voice. 'Your story, I mean?'
> 'Naturally,' said Sadie. She sucked on her pipe for a moment, then added, 'Now dry up and listen.'
> And the newcomer under the cloak drank, and listened […].[19]

At this point the function of the reader as prosumer comes to the fore, as the reader is asked to contribute ideas in 150 words or less and to tune in the following week for another installment of the Quill. If readers do not contribute, the Quill will stop – the reader is, therefore, highly encouraged to intrude into the narrative world, as this particular text needs to be collectively written and read rather than privately processed. At first the usefulness of the readers' contribution is vague, but a year after Magic Quill was born, site managers found a more concrete way of sourcing their readers' ideas and creativity. They introduced the Double Challenge, a system which demonstrated the opening up of the text and manipulability of narrative that contribute to the refiguring of the reader. The double challenge consists, on the one hand, of a survey, the winning vote of which will determine the general direction the storyline takes. The second part is a contest which asks readers to add particular details to the story with a view to integrating the winning contest entry into the Magic Quill two weeks down the line. In the survey, readers are asked to decide upon elements such as which character will drink a potion that will send them back in time, or which character should be the next to spin a tale. In the contest, readers are asked to describe particular magical objects, compose spells, and create names and other such details. The suggestions made by readers are channeled into a forum that is available for all to see and comment upon, so that the choices being made by Robbie, the writer of the Quill, are visible for all to see and discuss, and the reader's role is intrusive and has power over the text. Each Quill episode includes the name of the contest winner and often that of a runner up, so that readers' input is acknowledged at each step of the process. Moreover, readers of the Quill can go back to the forum associated with the episode in order to evaluate Robbie's choice of sug-

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19   Ibid.

gestions, enhancing the public dimension surrounding the writing and the reading of the text in this format.

The collaborative aspect of this form of writing is only made possible through cyberspace, which has altered the communication model that exists in the publishing world and reconfigured the role of the reader. Under these revised circumstances, it is now realistic to claim that in one day a fan could participate in a blog, write a piece of fan fiction, produce a video and write a review whilst listening to the latest Pottercast, a podcast produced by fans for fans available on another popular fan website, The Leaky Cauldron.[20] Readers, however, are not playing different roles in different settings at different times as actors do on stage, because in cyberspace, they are invited to perform hybrid functions, playing many roles at the same time in the same place. These distributed stories allow the reader to infiltrate and personalize the source text through a process that Manuel Castells calls *narrowcasting*, implying that 'Old-fashioned mass media delivering a mass audience a standardized product is replaced by proliferating multimedia or micro-media of 'narrowcasting', the many to many communications of the Internet that allows the story to reflect the reader's input.'[21] The text is, therefore, performed through a *one-to-one* and "many-to-many at once" logic that replaced the *one-to-many* logic of the past. This kind of narrative is globally produced and locally distributed, so that narrowcasting replaces broadcasting and through different applications readers are able to use the distributed network of the story, as discussed above, to play and perform their interpretation of it, as can be seen in the You Tube fan video example analysed below.

### The Harry vs. Voldemort Rap Battle

The relevance of readers' play and performance of meaning deserves a more in-depth analysis than it is possible to award it here, however, some basic principles can be demonstrated through a brief overview of two particular Harry Potter fan videos on You Tube. YouTube fan productions demonstrate ways in which readers appropriate character and plot, re-rendering them into styles and contexts that reflect their own realities, while maintaining a level of consistency with the source texts. The Harry vs. Voldemort rap song, for example, is produced by Indy Mogul and is part of the *Indy Mogul Original Short* series.[22] Gaining over 18,000,000 hits to date, the video is tagged as a test video and is shot on the roof of a high building showing a very contemporary urban scene in the background. This is the everyday world of readers: unfinished buildings and unattractive industrial landscapes containing none of the nostalgia of Hogwarts and the magical world. Whilst the set-up of this

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20  For more about Pottercasts please see: <http://www.the-leaky-cauldron.org/pottercast/?page_id=102>.
21  For more on the concept of narrowcasting please see: Manuel Castells, 'Epilogue: informationalism and the network society', in *The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age* by P. Himanen, ed., (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001) p. 170.
22  Please view at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTHn50FPmi8>.

shoot is obviously basic and temporary, evidenced by the dilapidated inside of Voldemort's room and the makeshift gramophone, special attention is given to consistency in the embodiment of the characters – costumes resemble those in the movies, actors featuring cloaks, Harry with the Gryffindor colours and Voldemort with pretty good make-up to create the slit-effect for his nose, visually resembling the mainstream embodiments of Harry, Voldemort and Rivers, a minor character in the series. They also maintain the same roles. Rivers remains a reporter on the scene, whilst Harry and Voldemort remain arch-enemies, the first embodying good and the second embodying evil. Here, as in mainstream versions, the two characters battle each other to determine the fate of the magical world. However, this time their power comes to the fore through rap music rather than magic, a stance somewhat contradicted at the end of the short film, when Voldemort kills all present by using the Avada Kedavra spell. Magic is too strong an element of this story world to be ignored completely and in most fan versions an element of magic features, albeit to different extents. Magic and rap juxtapose the fantastic and the real in an interesting way in this clip. Rap holds none of the epic connotations that magic does, but it serves to externalize very strong emotions which are particularly important in the final stages of Rowling's saga. It serves to translate into popular cultural terms the angst felt mostly by Voldemort – a shady character, a disturbed child, easily judged for his evil deeds yet one whom readers come to pity towards the end of the series. Like so many rap artists, Voldemort is a victim of society and, choosing the path of self-destruction, he ends up dead. The rap genre allows the story to be told in more direct, possibly offensive terms, with Voldemort saying to Harry, 'I'll slay your ass out like Cedric Diggory', 'You's a punk ass little kid', 'you're a peewee witch midget with a dead mommy' and Harry replying, 'If you look under my cloak you'll see my Hagrid size balls', 'I smoked basilisk and I'll smoke you too'.[23] And in the end rap also allows the victim to triumph – this is his arena and yet, because in real terms it would be too harsh for pleasant entertainment, Voldemort wins through a magic spell so that again, the fantastic is brought in to subvert the reality value of the moment generating a hybrid text that reflects readers' creative interpretation of the source story.

In many ways, this intrusive creation of cult meaning is generated through role-play and performance, locating readers within the narrative world as they embody the characters of the story, as in the rap battle. When this happens, the relationship between reader and story is more like drama than it is like a picture, a book or a film. In theatre, the individual director's take on a story is interesting because audiences are curious to find out which elements of a well-known story this director has opted to keep as opposed to those that others have omitted. Authorial intent and historical context are placed second to the opportunity of discovering a different reading of the story, such as the rap battle above and the collective effort that staging a play demands.  This is an important claim to make, as the implication that fandom is a response

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23  Ibid.

to dramatic rather than literary modes of storytelling draws attention to the generation of a day-to-day subjectivity formed by readers in the real time of deliberately fragmentary experiments. Readers are reconfigured because, according to Nicholas Bourriaud in his 1998 book, *Relational Aesthetics*:

> The imaginary of our period is concerned with negotiations, links and coexistence. We no longer try to make progress thanks to conflict and clashes, but by discovering new assemblages, possible relations between distinct units, and by building alliances between different partners so that art becomes a 'state of encounter', and the emphasis is now placed on external relationships.[24]

The process of reading thus not only involves the creation of multiple versions of the story and the retelling of aspects of the source text, but also the distribution and discussion of these grassroots creations. The activity generated by fandom, both in the past as well as the present becomes, one may claim, a prototype for the way in which literature and the arts are currently being consumed. Based on notions of collective intelligence, user-generated content and a new culture of participation, media products become all about a brand and the community that forms around that brand.[25] The contemporary reading process is, as can be seen in the examples quoted earlier, collective and shared, played and performed in everyday life; a piecing together of multiple texts and conversations, in the context of an eclectic culture, in which the reconfigured reader is not just playing one role at a time, but a number of roles contemporaneously.

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24  Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 1st English edn., trans. by James Gussen and Lili Porten (Paris, Les Presse Du Reel, 2002) p.166.

25  For more on these three concepts please see Tim O'Reilly, 'What is Web 2.0,' *O'Reilly* (August 2005), from <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/03/what-is-web-20.html>.