The New Pornography: The Rise of Fanfic

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Fanfic has become the new porn.

The modern world has openly embraced the sexualization of nearly everything, and the superheroes of *The Avengers*, the drag-racers of *The Fast and the Furious* and the Doctors of *Doctor Who* are no exception.

Comic books, once the sacred texts of nerdy America, have become the source material on which all of your favorite pornographic stories are based.

Which is exactly why I, a journalist pursuing her masters, decided to put my writing talents to use: I was going to join in, and write a pornographic fanfic.

If there were fanfics about everything, and anybody could write and publish their own stories on Tumblr, Archive of Our Own, Wattpad, and the internet as a whole, this would be easy.

All I had to do, it seemed, was a pick a fandom, write a nice smutty story, and post it online.

It seemed one could get involved in anything- should I have Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark taking a nice break from *The Hunger Games*? Would Glenn and Maggie take time off from zombies in *The Walking Dead*?

I decided to settle on what was, whether I’d realized it or not at the time, my first fandom: *Harry Potter*.

With a colorful cast of witches and wizards, surely writing this would be as easy as Ron Weasley winning a game of wizard’s chest.

After all, if amateur writers all over the internet were writing fanfic porn, how hard could it be for me, a writer with an undergraduate degree in English, about to have a master’s in journalism?
Fanfiction is fan-written stories about fictional characters or real-life celebrities. Amateur writers post their content on Tumblr, Livejournal, Archive of Our Own, Fanfiction.net, or other online sharing sites.

From there, it can be reblogged, liked, posted or shared by anybody who wants to read it.

There’s no way to measure exactly how many fanfics exist in the world, but Archive of Our Own, one of the most popular platforms, has 1,001,000 users and 2,612,000 works alone. Wattpad, another popular platform, says that 45 million people around the world have joined.

Fanfiction is turning from the internet’s dirty little secret to a world phenomenon.

And while some fics are innocent, with Doctor Who simply traveling through time, or Katniss Everdeen saving the day, many are much more explicit.

Take Fifty Shades of Grey, the mainstream, Cinderella story of fanfic, about a little Twilight fanfiction story that found itself at the height of cultural zeitgeist, with author E.L. James setting records on The New York Times bestsellers list, and the movie trailer for the second Fifty Shades film beating Star Wars: The Force Awakens for the most viewed trailer in 24 hours. The explicit nature of the book has made the book become popularly known as “mom porn.”

But it’s not just mom porn.

It’s the fastest selling novel series in history.

Fans everywhere are reading porn-fics about their favorite characters.
Over 1 billion fans of UK X-Factor phenomenon One Direction have read One Direction fanfic *After*, a pornographic reimagining of Harry Styles by Anna Todd.

The target audience of *After*? Young, high-school age girls, devouring the pages to see what happens after Harry gives Tessa her first orgasm by a lake before they even know what the world orgasm means.

Fanfic has become the new porn, and I was about to write a pornographic fic.

Surrounded by studious journalists calling government agencies, putting in their FOIA requests, and recording audio on their Marantz, I started with my equally daunting task, and began to dive into the world of fanfic porn.

Writing had always been a natural effort for me, and surely I could accomplish this with ease.

A guide on Tumblr aptly named “How to Write Smut (For Virgins),” posted by “PoshHelpers,” offered telling advice for smut-virgins such as myself.

Step One, according to the guide, was to read a lot of smut, which meant that down the rabbit hole I went.

I read as Bruce Banner and Tony Stark had sex fourty four times, with Captain America joining in once, and Thor finding them in the coat closet once.

I followed Sherlock Holmes and Watson as they began to use their detective skills on each other.

And I found Harry Styles and bandmate Louis Tomlinson doing things on a tour bus that I hadn’t even heard of before.
So as my fellow students poured over their Capstone thesis projects, researching how difficult it was for Syrian refugees to seek Asylum in the United States, or evaluating sexism in different industries, I read some porn. 

_A lot of porn._

So much porn, actually, that every time it seemed like there was nothing new to write about, I found more character pairings, more new positions, and more exotic locations.

The research skills that i’d honed in on in my very first semester were clearly going to good use.

And when my head felt like it was about to explode from all of the internet’s wildest and weirdest fantasies, I was ready for “How to Write Smut (For Virgins)” Step Two.

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There’s a wide variety of places to find your favorite fanfic porn.

Just like choosing your favorite pornographic website, from RedTube to Pornhub, everybody gravitates towards one fanfic site, from ArchiveofOurOwn to Wattpad.

ArchiveofOurOwn, Wattpad, and _Fanfiction.net_ all allow fans completely free access. No gimmicks.
Archive of Our Own, for one, has been around since 2008. It’s one of the sites that allows more explicit works onto it. And there’s no membership fee. Just go to the site, type in the fandom you like, and there’s a world of expanded worlds at your fingertips.

Archive of Our Own was created in response to the strict limitations set by fanfiction.net. In other words, it provided a platform for people to post specifically their smutty, sex fanfic.

And Wattpad is a striking example of the growth of fanfic on the internet, a financial success from the brain of Toronto based CEO Allen Lau.

His idea, at the conception of it in 2006, was to create a global phenomenon for internet publishing.

Investors include Union Square Ventures, which also invested in internet gold standards Twitter, Tumblr, and Foursquare.

It’s since raised over $67 million in US funding, cementing it’s status as a financial success.

With 300 million unique stories and 2.3 million writers sharing stories on the website per month, up half a million from last year, it’s no surprise that it pulls in big money from even bigger advertisers.

Which, for an app that gives away all of it’s content for free, is substantial.

Wattpad created Wattpad Studios to allow work to bre created in other mediums, as well as the big money maker, Wattpad Brand Solutions.

Wattpad Brand Solutions uses the connection between brands and writers to form a profitable relationship for both. Kraft and General Electric are part of this.
There’s serious money in fanfic, for the websites, and the writers.

The infamous face of fanfic porn, *Fifty Shades of Grey*’s E.L. James has a net worth of $95 million. In 2013, she landed among the top of the Forbes’ list of highest paid authors, and she sold the film rights to *Fifty Shades of Grey* for five million dollars.

Not everyone can expect to make as much as James, but she does show that there’s serious money to be made in fanfic porn.

Fans have been writing erotic fanfiction since the very start. But it wasn’t a mass phenomenon until James came along.

James is now a household name, but the 53-year-old London native was a fan just like anybody else a few years ago. A studio manager’s assistant, James became instantly wrapped up in the world of Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight*, quickly writing two sequels to the series, then using the pen name “Snowqueens Icedragon” to post on Fanfiction.net in 2009. And when her stories became too erotic to be published on the site, she came up with a solution.

Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele were born, and the rest is *Fifty Shades of Grey* history. The series sold 125 million copies worldwide, and has garnered a series of movies starring British actor Jamie Dornan and Hollywood royalty Dakota Johnson.

Where *Fifty Shades* differed from *Star Trek* or *Shakespeare*, besides in the writing, was the plot. *Fifty Shades* follows a masochistic, rich, good looking bachelor with serious commitment issues who abuses a naive young college student named Anastasia, both emotionally and physically. Fans were enthralled by their bipolar relationship immediately.
Christian would bring Anastasia to his Red Room of Pain, and the world saw his whips, scarves, and chains.

Now, published porn was becoming a real thing too.

After *Fifty Shades*, the door was open for more and more fans to discover this erotic fanfiction.

*Fifty Shades* opened the gates to fanfic porn heaven for fans everywhere.

People were addicted to published fanfic porn. Fans of Anna Todd’s One Direction fic *After* took over social media, “shipping” Tess and Harry Styles.

“#Hessa, why can’t Hessa be real, I would ship till I die,” Kimberly H. posts on Pinterest.

On [Goodreads.com](http://www.Goodreads.com), Elaine reviews, “I CRIED AND SCREAMED SO MUCH IT'S SO GOOD MY EMOTIONS ARE ALL OVER THE PLACE THAT’S WHY I HAVE TO TYPE IN ALL CAPS.”

The Tumblr tag “Hessa”, or the name fans use to pair Tess and Harry together, yields millions of results. Readers love the pair together.

*After*’s Todd collected a six figure deal for stripping the barcode, or changing the names of her characters, and turning it into a book.

In a society obsessed with money and sex, it’s not at all surprising that there’s money to be made writing fanfic porn.

Fanfic began evolving into the new pornography because it was marketable and profitable.

There’s money to be made it exploiting the sex life of the lead singer of a wildly popular boy band.
But the fact that there’s six figures to be made in it doesn’t so much reflect on the status of the readers, but of our society as a whole.

The second step of “PoshHelpers” guide is titled “Just Like Riding a Bicycle (Practice, Practice, Practice).”

“Just like in real life where most people masturbate before they have sex with a partner,” the author writes, “Write smut on your own before you do it. Writing smut fanfiction with a character you know well is a great way to start. That was how I got started and it worked well because I knew the character and how they would act. Even if the situation wasn’t so comfortable for me, the people in it were.”

Hermione Granger is more than familiar to me, and after countless years of rushing to bookstores to buy the latest *Harry Potter* book, and waiting on line for hours for midnight showings of the films, I was pretty sure that I knew exactly how she would act.

She’s smart and sassy and headstrong, and almost certainly the backbone behind every heroic thing that Harry Potter does in all seven novels.

So, in between writing inverted pyramid stories about Environmental Impact Statements and catchy ledes about the legacy of Selena on Mexican-American culture, I wrote, and re-wrote, plenty of smut scenes with Hermione and Ron.
As a lifelong writer with a flair for creative writing, I’m sure it’s expected that these stories were absolutely riveting.

I was Margaret Mitchell, and this was my *Gone with the Wind*.

Except it was absolutely terrible.

There were only so many ways to say “sex,” and half of them sounded so generic and cheesy that it was actually painful.

I didn’t want to be E.L. James, writing sentences like, “He reaches between my legs and pulls on the blue string… what! And… a gently pulls my tampon out and tosses it into the nearby toilet.”

D. Ciminelli, known to her Tumblr adorers as Ghostcat3000, helped me better understand fanfiction.

Ciminelli has written popular fics about “Daredevil,” “Veronica Mars,” “New Girl” and others.

“World’s Best Wingwoman (The Not Trying to be Rude Remix”, a “New Girl,” fic, drew me in.

The summary?

“A girl, a boy, a bacon wrapped fig, a red dress and the things we do for our friends.”

This was my kind of story, and Ciminelli was undoubtedly an eloquent writer. While the works of ghostcat3000 aren’t pornographic in nature, I needed to strengthen my fanfic writing at the core, and understand *why* people wrote fanfic to understand *how* to write it better.
“I got into fanfiction at two points in my life,” Ciminelli says. “Once when I was in my teens and watching a show called Oz. I searched on the web for more content about the show and found some dedicated fic archives. All these stories! For free! How wonderful! The show ended and after a bit, I completely forgot about fic.”

But then, Ciminelli says, that break didn’t last too long.

“Fast forward to the birth of my first child. My brain was sleep-deprived and the prospect of novels was too much,” Ciminelli says. “I was watching a lot of romantic comedies at the time and on a whim, I looked up fanfic for them and boom! Sucked right back in. Again, free. No obligation to finish within any time frame! Could read on my phone! Anywhere!”

Cimenlli and I, then, had a lot in common. A well written fanfic can suck you right in, which was something I had to keep in mind. Plus, of course, the transformative nature of fanfic.

“What I enjoy about fanfiction is legion—there are so many things to like,” Ciminelli says. “When an author explores alternatives to canon and/or finds ways to open up smaller moments to give them more weight and meaning. I love the incredible professional-quality creativity of some of the fics I read. I enjoy seeing how people transform work to address the issues they see in it. It is a type of affectionate critique that I think is wonderful and inspiring.”

Combining step two and Ciminelli’s advice, it’s clear that a good fanfic takes what we already know about characters, and moments we already love, and molds them together.
So, what would the brilliant Hermione Granger do if she and Ron Weasley had been trapped in the Chamber of Secrets?

Now I was on the way to something great.

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Fanfic isn’t a new thing at all, just as porn is hardly new.

Fanfiction, classic fanfic and not necessarily porn, dates back to the 1970’s.

What started out as a little cult classic show named Star Trek produced an entire franchise and cultural empire, leading to multiple spin-off series like Deep Space Nine and Voyager, a series of successful movies recently rebooted by JJ Abrams, and of course, a series of Star Trek fanzines that featured fanfiction stories, most of which seemed to focus specifically on Captain Kirk and Spock- the first notable example of fans “shipping,” or, in simplified terms, rooting for, a pairing.

But some can argue that Kirk, Spock and the rest of the Enterprise crew, may not really have been the first. And depending on what your definition of fanfiction is, this is a plausible argument. The truth is, fanfiction is taking a character-fictional or famous nonfiction-and developing a story about them. Now think back to your 10th grade English class, and try and see if you can think of any fanfiction.

Does Julius Caesar ring any bells?

Madeline “Flourish” Klink is a fanfiction expert.
And that’s not a term to be taken lightly: she studied fanfiction at MIT, and is one half the duo behind “Fansplaining,” a fanfiction podcast that she runs alongside fellow fanfiction expert Elizabeth Minkel.

Klink co-founded FictionAlley when she was thirteen, the world’s largest Harry Potter fanfiction community. Her MIT thesis? An indepth study of Twilight fans and, of course, Twilight haters.

Klink knows her fanfic.

She explains that fanfiction is actually quite old.

In fact, it has artistic and academic routes.

“Fanfiction has existed literally forever,” Klink says. “Think about the ancient Greeks. They’re writing plays that are versions of different myths, that they already have, which are essentially fanfictions or republications of those myths. You keep moving forward you keep seeing all of these stories, like Shakespeare’s plays. Most of those are taking older plays or older stories or rewriting them.”

And that’s what people continued to do, though not at the mainstream level that fanfic is at today.

“Fanfiction was sort of an underground thing,” she says.

She says fanfic was found in fanzines, which were usually only available at conferences.

“Most people would never find it,” she says. “They would have to be really into Star Trek, go to a convention, look around, and then find the fanzines.”

But then fanfic started to develop online.
“The first sort of boring digital fandom was the one that I joined at first,” Klink says. “The X-Files.”

And as the internet grew, so did the fanfic base around the world.

People could easily read these stories online, not have to chase them down at conventions.

Now, between Archive of Our Own, Fanfiction.Net or Wattpad, fanfic writers and readers can access their favorite fanfictions within seconds.

And as it grew in popularity online, the nature of it started to change.

Forget the X-Files, it was now the XXX Files.

Once fanfic writers started to see that, for the most part, the more explicit scenes, the more views they got, they started to add in more scenes.

And as a younger group of writers were able to self-publish their fics on the internet, they started to transform the work into something more erotic.

It’s simple: in a sex obsessed culture, pornographic scenes became clickbait.

Plus, the more erotic the fic, the bigger chances of landing a deal with a publishing house.

“Those are the types of stories that really rose to the top because they’re the ones that have the most public appeal,” Klink says. “And as soon as you see stories like that rising the top, people who work in publishing are going to take notice and start looking for other stories to do that as well.”

Klink sees the humor in this.
“I think it’s funny,” Klink says, “because I think that fanfic’s reputation was so bad that nothing could make it worse.”

But, she sees the growing influence. Klink says that there are plenty of great nonpornographic fics out there, but of course, there’s a huge library of erotic ones.

“It’s not untrue that fic has been focused on romantic and sexual relationship a lot of the time,” she says, “it’s true that fanfic has porny bits a lot of the time, more than your usual spread of novels that were sold not as erotica.”

The more erotic and scandalous fics simply get noticed more.

Fanfic has evolved from Shakespearian plays to *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

It’s evolved, then, to evolve with our culture.

Our culture over-sexualizes everything.

And fanfic is just reflecting that.

The third step in the guide is titled “get to know them before you go to bed with them.”

Which is sound advice for both writing a fanfic and living your life in general.

Questions proposed including whether they’re a virgin, if they’re dominant or submissive, and if they have fetishes.

J.K. Rowling certainly did not outline these facts in any of her novels. It can only be assumed that Hermione is a virgin, but what on Earth would her fetishes be? Gingers?
The guide says that you should answer all of the following questions:


2. How long have they been together/known each other?

3. Have they slept together before? If so, how much? If not, how far have they gotten with each other?

4. What’s the situation? Is it a quickie or the end of a romantic date? First time or old habit?

5. What is the setting? Backseat of a car, bedroom, closet, hotel?

6. Does your character even care about the other character’s pleasure?

I make my own little character cheat sheet.

In my new erotic wizarding world, Hermione Granger is a virgin.

And to shake things up, I’m trapping her down in the Chamber of Secrets with Draco Malfoy, because that seems like more fun.

In that case, they’re not a couple. In fact, this is forbidden. They’ve known each other for years, they’ve never slept together before, and the situation is that they’re locked in the setting of my favorite Potter book.

It crosses my mind that we know so much about our favorite characters, and their authors do such a great job at developing them.

Potter fans all over the world know and love the characters for such diverse reasons, most notably how relatable they are.

We know what Harry got on his OWL exams, we know Ron’s entire family history, we know that Hermione is a friend to the house elves.
But we never learn what position they like best.

Which goes to show how in the modern world we can take *anything*-no matter how inherently unsexy it is, and make it sexy.

We took “Geek culture” of comic books and made it an entire universe of pornography.

For years, Batman and Robin have been the ultimate hero team, and somehow we managed to make them have a love affair with plenty of BDSM, and chains, and even “human furniture,” whatever that means.

Spock and Kirk have been friends on the *USS Enterprise* for decades, but somehow recently we decided they, too, were conducting a forbidden love affair.

And, sure, while watching *Game of Thrones* it’s obvious that Khaleesi and Jon Snow would make a pretty attractive couple, but with absolutely no context for a romantic relationship between them, where did they idea even come from to make them sleep together on the Iron Throne?

*Anything* is sexual these days.

Livejournal user “Eliade” has provided an entire list of kinks, tropes, cliches and fetishes for me to browse through as I continue to write.

I can’t even get through the A’s.

It starts out with the pretty straight forward “absence makes the heart grow fonder,” but escalates quickly.

And by quickly, I mean “aliens make them have sex” is the eighth category, with one of the subcategories simply reading “take one for the team.”
But just because modern society makes everything from superheroes to aliens sexual, doesn’t mean that I can.

Despite all of the advice offered from my online guide and my experts, one thing becomes increasingly evident: I am really, really bad at writing fanfic.

I struggle for hours trying to write a cohesive paragraph, and it just won’t happen. I feel absolutely ridiculous.

I got a perfect score on the writing section of my SAT’s, I graduated with an English Bachelor’s degree, and am pursuing a master’s degree in journalism.

But when it comes to writing smutty fanfic, I absolutely can not do it.

I failed.

I look in the Newsroom around me, where students are pounding vigorously on their keyboards, getting their thoughts out, and generally succeeding at the world of writing in general.

In a world where lines like "'Argh!' I cry as I feel a weird pinching sensation deep inside me as he rips through my virginity" actually exist in published novels, as in E.L. James’ work, I have failed miserably.

But that’s okay.

Because there’s still millions of fanfic pornos to go around.