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Fanbinding and a Community-Generated Information Environment

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1. Introduction

In June 2020, fanbinder ArmoredSuperHeavy created Renegade Bindery, a Discord server for fanbinders of any experience to gather, discuss, and exchange resources, advice, and files to support one another's artistic object-making. Renegade Bindery also provides a centralized environment to study fanbinding from book historical and information frameworks (Coker 2017). In our previous research, we examined fanbinding as altering traditionally-affirmed modes of book production and as a preservation practice that sustains an information circuit outside of traditional documentation (Buchsbaum 2022, Kennedy 2022). In this paper, we ask how the communal elements of the Discord server sustain the information environment of fanbound work creation, circulation, and dissemination and how it crosses digital and material boundaries.

Fans create infrastructure to support and motivate fanwork creation. This is a form of gifted labor, which supports community growth (Turk 2015). In Renegade Bindery, we see this gifted labor sustain an information environment through crowd-sourced reference resources, material swaps, exchanges, and community events that support fanbinding projects. Renegade Bindery also demonstrates how gifted labor sustains growing fan communities. In Summer 2020, the server comprised approximately 30 members, which grew to over 100 by mid-autumn, and reached 400 members the following summer. As of July 2022, the server counts nearly 930 members. The Bindery is now entering an organizational period supported by many volunteers who understand the need for distributed volunteer labor to run the server (ArmoredSuperHeavy 2020a).

This paper is based on survey data from five of those 27 moderators and volunteers who contribute to Renegade Bindery's events, challenges, resources, and social media profiles. We posted the survey, which included information regarding the scope of this project and a consent form, in the moderators' and volunteers server, which was established to accommodate the rapid growth of Renegade Bindery and the sustained interest from members to contribute to volunteer efforts; they use that server to organize infrastructure, social media arms, projects, and newsletters of the main server.

2. Methodology

This study underwent an IRB review and was granted exempt status from the Office of Research Compliance at Stony Brook University. Responses were collected anonymously via a Google survey posted in the Renegade Volunteers Server, and all respondents read and completed an information sheet and consent form before answering the survey.

We recognize our positionality as aca-fans engaged in research on a public-private fan community. We are members of the Renegade Bindery server; we do not drop in and out of the server simply for the sake of analysis. Given the enthusiastic engagement of the Bindery's membership, it is difficult to keep up with the pace of conversation if one is not engaged in daily or regular fanbinding practices. We do practice fanbinding, however, and use the resources of the Bindery to create our own projects; these guides also contribute to our academic analysis as resources on the technique, craft, and ethos of the practice (ArmoredSuperHeavy 2020b).

With these fluid roles as fanbinder and academic in mind, we establish clear boundaries around our academic engagement with the server. In previous projects, we worked with moderators to create a private, locked channel for Bindery members who participated in the research. Beyond an initial call for participants, we do not discuss the project's process or participants' answers outside of that private channel. We do this to both protect the privacy of participants and ensure that non-participants do not feel we are only present for the sake of academic analysis (e.g. mining conversation content without consent).

In this project, we worked with ArmoredSuperHeavy to establish a "survey" channel in the Renegade Volunteers server. Because the survey was open to all members of the server, all of the responses were directed to the Google Survey, and all responses were anonymous, we did not prompt additional conversation in the channel and did not lock the channel.

3. Building Fanwork Environments

Fans work together on one-to-one and collective scales to create fan spaces and fanworks. They generate a sense of community by contributing to infrastructure in fan spaces, responding to circulated fanworks, and generally supporting the communal goals of fandom. Several existing fandom traditions, such as fanwork exchanges and big bangs, are rooted in collaborative environments. That is, while fan creators often create in their own time using their own materials, communities serve an integral role in facilitating ideas and exchanges that contribute to fanwork generation, establishing a feedback loop between resource, process, and product.

Traditionally, communication circuits account for the different actors that contribute to book production, as modeled in Robert Darnton's (1982) communication circuit in "What is the history of books?" and seen in simplified form on the right side of Figure 1. In our previous research, we modeled a fanfiction communication circuit that locates fanfiction production adjacent to traditional modes of book production. The reader's desire to spend more time in a source text universe such as *Lord of the Rings*, encountered in the right-hand circuit through traditional means like a publishing house and a bookstore, drives their search for

Fan Fiction Communication Circuit

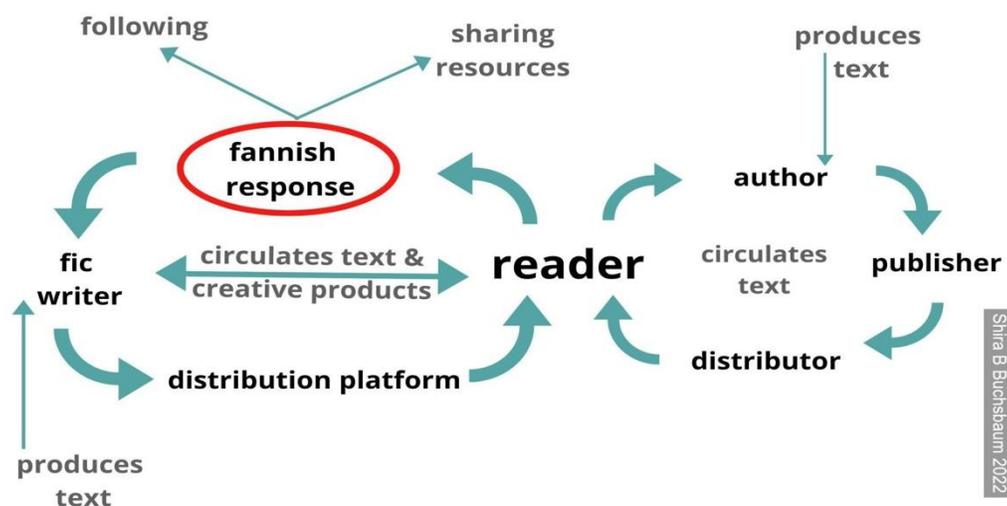


Figure 1. The Fanfiction Communication circuit, which locates the reader as the driving force between traditional texts and fic texts.

fic text and creative fan products, circulated in the left-hand circuit through fandom means, such as sites like Archive of Our Own and Tumblr (Figure 1). “Fannish response” such as fanart, fanbinding, and modes of affirmation operates as one node through which fanworks circulate, as circled in red on the left side of Figure 1 (Buchsbaum 2022).

In examining Renegade Bindery and considering the role of collective work, we found it difficult to create a definitive circulation of products and actors to model a “fanbound work” circuit. Instead, a combination of reference resources, material exchanges, community challenges, and general encouragement within the Discord server create a hospitable environment to workshop and create fanbound works. Rather than model that as a circulation of one entity catalyzing another, we visualize this as a set of relationships between object, actor, response, and community, with the outer layers of community infrastructure and personal responses influencing the inner layers of individual fanbinders’ practices and vice versa (Figure 2).

This map accounts for collective fan elements (archives, donations, conventions, chat groups) that provide infrastructure beneficial to all fans, as Turk (2015) discusses in her article regarding gifted and communal labor in fandom. The model accounts for the shortcomings of the fanfiction communication circuit, which anchors fic production in four inflexible nodes and does not depict the aggregating nature of fandom (Buchsbaum 2020). Instead, the Community Model captures fandom’s web-like nature and shows that fanwork production crosses the

Community as Recipient of and Context for Fanwork Production

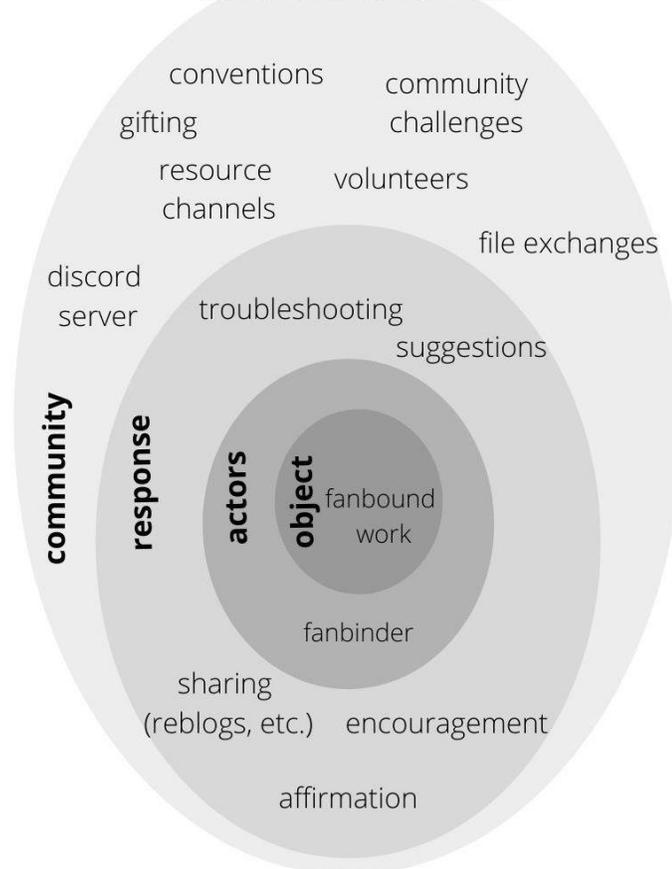


Figure 2. Map showing relationships between object, actor, response, and community in fanwork production.

boundaries of object, actors, and response, continuously drawing from and contributing to community (Turk 2015). To that end, we see how fanbound work production is sustained by community support, and community ties are likewise sustained by mutual interest in fanbound work production.

4. What Makes Fanbinding Different from Other Fanworks?

The “entrance fee” of becoming a fanbinder is both a steep learning curve and a high upfront cost of acquiring materials and equipment in bulk. Fanbound works made with cheaper materials might cost \$12 per work, and those made with premium materials cost over \$100 per work, excluding rates for up to 20 labor hours per object (Buchsbaum 2022). Fanbinders often seek ways to defray costs, either

through making and recycling their own material and equipment, or, as a community coalesces, through sharing materials and typesets. Fanbinders engage in a temporally, materially, and laborially intensive hobby that benefits from a culture of sharing and mutual exchange rather than hoarding. This is reflected in the established values of knowledge sharing and practices of collaborative learning and creation in the server.

Renegade Bindery is a centralized location where we can see how the time and material intensity of the practice generates a collaborative aspect to the server as a means of supporting one another's projects and defraying costs. As an online community centered around a material craft, fanbinders adapted digitally-based fan traditions to traverse the online and material spheres. For example, the materials swap channel in Renegade Bindery facilitates connections between binders to share their excess materials with each other. One of our survey participants likened this to old community boards like Freecycle, which served a similar purpose (P2).

There are challenges to sharing these materials, including postage and international shipping costs, differences in paper sizes depending on one's country, and the cumbersome nature of sending certain physical materials, like bookcloth. But respondents emphasized that there are myriad ways to support and motivate their fellow Bindery members in their projects, especially through expanding knowledge bases. They agree that "Resources are meant to be shared with the community. None of us want to be that person who locks knowledge behind a paywall" (P4). One respondent specifically noted that the Bindery encourages question-asking and creative responses, because not only do members find their questions quickly answered, but others are prompted to share new or surprising approaches to material use, and "the group as a whole improves" (P2).

Altogether, the Discord is designed to offer support and resources in a variety of ways, including active conversation and passive reference, supporting a community and communal environment that undergirds fanwork creation and maintains the infrastructure required to produce more fanworks.

5. Renegade Bindery Infrastructure

One of the key ways of maintaining a hospitable community is through maintaining the Discord server's infrastructure. In the nearly two years since its creation, Renegade Bindery has gained 900+ members and over 30 channels, necessitating greater attention and labor dedicated to the infrastructure and organization of the server. The server moderators have implemented a categorical structure to keep the channels organized. The overarching categories include (mostly) book talk, for resources and conversations for facilitating binding projects; just chatting, for sharing finished products, recceing fanfics, and other general discussions; quiet

channels, for specific projects; and utility channels, which are restricted use channels for resource and file sharing.

Moderators regularly add channels to the server dedicated to topics of interest, exchanges, and community events. These channels tend to fall into the “response” layer of our graph, where members actively show off their work, troubleshoot problems, ask and answer questions, and cheer one another on. Our survey respondents described an informal process of channel creation based on the volume of expressed interests and direct requests resulting from conversations in the server. One participant spoke to the creation of the “fandom studies” channel specifically:

over various occasions folks have shared posts, articles, anecdotes about fandom studies and others would read, comment, and generally express their interest in this work that is being done. Because of that we decided to request that a fandom studies channel be created so that there is a repository for this information that is more specific to that. And there is also the hope that some of us will be able to be able to make use of it. (P1)

The mods create channels in response to the needs of the growing community rather than imposing structure without community support. This allows for the community to expand naturally according to the priorities of its members, but also creates challenges to the organizational structure of the server.

The improvisational nature of channel creation prevents moderators from planning infrastructural needs in advance. One of the survey respondents described how they embrace this improvised growth:

as folks propose ideas and have the interest in leading them, they take off. I usually just add a channel so they have a place to talk. We’re fully improvising what’s happening in Renegade, and setting precedents for future years without being super self-aware about it. (P3)

The mods prioritize setting up the channels members need and impose any necessary structure following the channel creation to maintain an organized server.

Organizational structure is often implemented in response to an issue or need that develops after a channel is created and established. For example, the fileshare channel recently underwent guideline changes. Initially, the channel was intended as a place for fanbinders to share their completed typeset files with other binders, allowing them to save time if they planned to bind the same work. As the server membership grew, the mods became more concerned about binders’ typeset files being stolen and sold for profit without their knowledge or consent, which reportedly happened to a binder on Patreon (P3). In response, the mods removed the typeset PDF files from the channel history and created a spreadsheet to track typeset files available upon request. Now, instead of posting files directly in the channel, binders input the information about their file into a Google form that populates the spreadsheet and allows other users to request the file: “That way it is

the individual who typeset it giving permission and not the server on their behalf” (P1). Here, the moderators reflected a set of fannish standards about respecting one another’s work in the regulation of the channel and exchange of resources.

Moderators and volunteers attempt to strike a balance between over-policing channel content and keeping channels dedicated to their specific purpose. This is a simpler task in channels created to a specific, and often time-limited, purpose such as Bindery, but the more general channels like “fic rec” tend to become unwieldy and necessitate additional support. Currently, there is no system in place to log and organize the reced fics, requiring users to scroll through the entire channel to find them. To alleviate this, the moderators plan to import the fic recs into an AO3 bookmarked collection to provide a centralized location for members to find reced fics with options for sorting and filtering, which are features built into AO3’s interface (P1). This solution also allows for conversation to flourish in the fic rec channel without the need for mod policing to keep the channel dedicated to links only.

The sheer volume of information contained in the server channels presents its own challenge to maintaining any sort of organizational structure. As one survey respondent described it: “here is so much information that it is sort of like opening a walk-in closet full of everything and it all just sort of being flung about” (P1). The server’s 900+ members regularly contribute to various discussion channels, provide links to resources they found helpful in their binding projects, rec fanfics, participate in challenges and events, show off and share files for completed projects, and much more. There is more information housed in the server than any one person could consume, let alone catalog in any meaningful way.

Moderators attempt to mitigate this by creating channels with specifically-defined information-sharing purposes. For example, the utility channels category includes the “reference” channel, which only allows posts from mods. The result is a channel exclusively containing important reference materials related to fanbinding uncluttered by conversation. Additionally, in the channels like the “resource-links” channel where members can freely add helpful resources they find and specific items can easily be lost, mods will pin messages containing particularly relevant information for that channel.

Even the more complex channels with seemingly endless resources and information to navigate still operate as centralized locations for that information. One survey respondent notes that “the fact that we have places where folks can dump info or resources they have found is super useful as it is less to look through than the entirety of the internet” (P2). Renegade Bindery provides a place to house all the relevant resources, discussions, and communities centered around fanbinding, and the mods maintain an organizational structure to make that information navigable. This creates a useful repository of information for fanbinders that furthers the creation of fanbound works.

Renegade Bindery operates as an active community and a repository of information and must often work around the limitations of its platform. Discord hosts the bindery server, but it is primarily a chat-based app. One of our survey participants pointed out that the bindery and many other communities adapt it to fill roles outside the scope of its design:

I think in general people try to make a Discord server serve multiple functions it may not be optimally suited to do. It logs all conversation apparently forever (creepy) but it's ultimately a chat platform, and I don't maintain expectations that people will read back or search prior chat history. Hence the utility channel that's mods-only posting links to key resources. (P3)

Fans are well-known for “repurposing existing platforms” to suit their needs, such as with LiveJournal (Fiesler & Dym 2020). Similarly, Renegade Bindery has assigned customized functionality to certain channels in the server in order to create a navigable and centralized community for all fanbinding resources, communication, events, projects, and related supportive activities.

The creativity and enthusiastic dedication of mods, volunteers, and general members in Renegade Bindery creates a self-reinforcing system that maintains the infrastructure of the server and the information environment. As one respondent describes it, “I am consistently underestimating the number of people interested and the amount of enthusiasm they bring to the table when it comes to Renegade in general and volunteer efforts in particular. Renegade members really blow me away” (P3). There are endless ways to contribute to the upkeep and success of the server. General members of the server suggest and run events and collaborative projects, host talks on subjects they are knowledgeable about, and volunteer for participation in community-wide endeavors. Through a collaborative effort between the mods, volunteers, and members, Renegade Bindery maintains an information environment conducive to the creation of fanbound objects through a wealth of shared resources and enthusiastic community support.

6. Communal Collaboration in the Bindery

In addition to the utility, reference, and technical resources supported by the Discord channels, Renegade Bindery also leverages the Discord structure to host bound fic and typeset file exchanges, incorporating gifted objects as well as gifted knowledge into the Bindery’s culture. These events and exchanges traverse the community and response layers of our graph, as they rely on higher-level organization from moderators or volunteers as well as one-to-one collaboration between participants who build on one another’s work. For example, bound fic exchanges require participants to typeset, bind, and mail their finished book to their assigned recipient. Typeset exchanges more closely resemble typical fandom

exchanges (of fanfic, fanart, or podfic) in that the exchange is digital: the participants typeset and exchange digital files that are ready for binding.

Renegade Bindery also hosts channels dedicated to collaborative projects. For example, the My Immortal challenge, which is described in the challenge sign up document as: “we all typeset a few chapters of fanfiction classic my immortal, and combine said chapters into one disaster of a masterpiece.” The Worm challenge aims to collaboratively bind a long web serial. These challenges echo traditions like Big Bangs, which team up fanfic writers with fanartists or podficcors to create a new fanwork within a certain time limit.

The exchanges and collaborative projects additionally demonstrate the myriad ways Renegade Bindery produces a generative environment for fanwork creation, whether through providing resources for personal projects (objects) or connecting members with challenges or gifting schemes (community & response). The outcome of the latter is either physical objects or digital files that can be used to create additional fanbound works.

7. Case Study: Bindery and the Role of Encouragement

Renegade Bindery’s “Bindery” event offers a useful case study to examine how the Discord’s community infrastructure provides space and encouragement for participants to create new fanworks. The “Bindery” was a month-long event hosted in February 2022 that encouraged binders of all levels to spend a month dedicated to fanbinding. The event organizers offered four levels (Renegade Bindery 2022):

- a beginner level to learn how to bind a book;
- Peaceful mode, which aimed to bind 1 book per week;
- medium paced, which aimed to bind one book per day; and
- “Extra Super Hard Rules” = 1 book/day with no prep beforehand (meaning the binders had to typeset during the month).

The Bindery was partially inspired by other fan-favorite events including NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month), which motivates participants to write a novel in one month, and Inktober, the month-long drawing challenges held in October. While the event drew inspiration from these other self-driven and community-motivated events, the emergence and shaping of Bindery reflects the environment of Renegade Bindery writ large. One person suggested the event and other members quickly “workshopped a set of rules” to make it a more inviting and accessible event for members of all fanbinding levels (P2).

The event itself was opt-in, and for those who participated, Bindery was “a way of helping me to set goals and be encouraged to work on my bookbinding” for a specific time period and “having the community of folks working on stuff is a huge encouragement to keep working and remember it has value even if it is just

for me” (P1). The success of Binderary in encouraging participants to dedicate time and commit to projects demonstrates how the community-built events of Renegade Bindery are successful in generating more fanworks, moving from the outer community and response rings to the inner “actor” and “object” rings.

As we have attempted to illustrate with these examples, the moderators and volunteers of Renegade Bindery provide the infrastructure and respond to the members’ ideas to create a hospitable environment for creating new fanworks, but the members themselves are highly motivated to utilize that infrastructure. Respondents repeatedly noted that new ideas come from “folks talking about things they love, in this case making books that they get to share with others as well as admiring the work of those around them” (P1). That interest in sharing and encouragement creates an organic environment for challenges and exchanges, because people “who love something so much ... want to find ways to celebrate, expand, and share that thing” (P1).

While these modes of sharing and exchanging are not unique to Renegade Bindery, the ability for members to bring other fandom experiences demonstrates the flexibility and hospitality of the infrastructure to support new ideas. These respondents also noted that these events, exchanges, and environment create an encouraging atmosphere that leads to more binding. One respondent wrote that participating in the typesetting exchange, where participants typeset files for one another,

was incredibly fun both sending and receiving mail! Having the typesets available was also nice, as it takes some of the stress off binding, and maybe gives you an opportunity to bind fics you haven't read before, to experience them as a book for the first time. It helps bring us closer as a community, getting excited over each other's work - and for Binderary, we had an EXPLOSION of activity as people posted their work and experiments and cheered each other on throughout the month. (P2)

This quotation demonstrates how the Binderary offered a directed opportunity for individual fanbinders to create objects and share their trials and successes to receive affirmative responses from their fellow binders, all the while strengthening the community ties of the server. But while the initial organizers set up the structure, the individual actors and objects generated energy and excitement all month long, modeling the positive feedback loop across each layer of the graph.

8. Conclusion: Foundations for the Future

Both the Renegade Bindery community infrastructure and the material objects generated by the community rely on gifted labor and sustain one another. Fanbinders depend on the knowledge, resources, and support in the community to motivate their fanwork creation. The community in turn depends on the enthusiasm

of the fanbinders to expand on the knowledge base of the community, share resources, and provide support for the infrastructure and community environment. The community in Renegade Bindery has grown and strengthened considerably since its founding two years ago. To support the server, a team of mods and volunteers have created a separate server dedicated to the maintenance of Renegade Bindery's infrastructure, community events, and outreach.

The mods and volunteers are actively seeking ways to engage the community with new events and resources, promote the community with outreach efforts, and strengthen the infrastructure to meet the needs of the growing server. Internally, they plan to circulate a regular community newsletter to keep members informed. In addition to the annual events already in place like Bindery and exchange events, a charity auction is in the works. Renegade Bindery also plans to promote the community and their achievements through attendance at cons (most recently, HavenCon in April 2022), scripting a one-page manifesto for inclusion in gift packages, and increasing presence on social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. To sustain the growing community, the mods and volunteers have outlined plans for creation of a DreamWidth community "for further discussion and housing resources" and, as previously mentioned, the Renegade Bindery AO3 fic rec collection which will be backed up to the WayBack Machine (P2).

All these efforts reflect an acknowledgement of the importance of the community to the creation of fanbound works while embracing fanbinding's unique position as operating in the material and digital spheres. For example, while at HavenCon in April 2022, binders had the opportunity to talk with bookbinders and book conservators at a nearby book arts center. Their interest in engaging with professional practitioners "merges this fannish practice into a long line of book history" (P1).

Additionally, as fanbound work exchanges and materials swap already brings the fanbinding community outside of the digital realm, mods and volunteers are creating pathways for further physical interaction with the community. For example, the Bindery has an established system of digital merit badges as a form of community support, which are "freely given whenever someone posts their first book, or admits to a mistake. Most of them are about making mistakes as rites of passage in becoming a fanbinder. (cased in book upside down, measure once cut twice, cut yourself, etc)" (P3). One respondent floated the idea of "merch and swag" in addition to material versions of these merit badges, writing "[s]ince this whole fanbinding practice revolves around bringing things into the physical world, it would make sense that we start to create physical mementos for our members" (P3).

Renegade Bindery is a robust example of the success and appeal of sharing, encouragement, and affirmation as motivating factors in the creation of fanworks; fanbinding practitioners have additional incentive to partake in these community-

based exchanges and challenges due to the time and material-intensive nature of their hobby. The community accommodates the resource needs of their members through creating various means of passive and active exchanges of knowledge, physical materials, digital resources or typesets, and objects. At the center of the community is an investment in creating bound works, and the community sustains that investment through layers of support and encouragement, reflected in the flexible, hospitable infrastructure of the Discord server. Renegade Bindery demonstrates the strengths, challenges, and tangible output of gifted labor through its successful support of members' fanbound work creation.

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