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The Design of Printed Fanfiction: A Case Study of Down to Agincourt Fanbinding

Naomi Jacobs
Lancaster University, naomi.jacobs@lancaster.ac.uk

JSA Lowe
info+jsal@documentacademy.org

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Introduction

Digital technologies have opened many new avenues for the design and publishing of written and related material. Dean (2019) suggests that: “Where print technologies led to a sense of the fixedness and authority of texts written by individual authors, digital technologies enable the creation of more flexible and collaborative texts.” In fan communities, we can see the Archive of Our Own (AO3) as an example of this. AO3 offers many affordances which allow fluidity of its texts, including the capacity to serialise, update and extend texts, embed multimedia and hyperlinks, and ascribe metadata including the highly complex and effective tagging system which supports creativity through its folksonomic structuring (Price, 2019). Fiesler et al (2016) have described AO3s development by the fan community it arose from as an example of feminist human computer interaction design values (Fiesler et al, 2016).

The new opportunities gained through digital publishing, however, do not negate the value fans put on printed texts. While not a new practice, there has been a recent upsurge in interest in the practice of fanbinding, when fans create physical printed copies of works of fanfiction. This is evident in a number of recent academic publications discussing the topic (Kennedy, 2022, Buchsbaum, 2022) but also a seemingly increased interest in this form of transformative work in online fan communities. Fans making use of printed material has never faded even as digital spaces have grown. Versaphile (2011) notes that zines, for example, “may have a much lower initial circulation, but hard copies have a permanence that newsgroup posts, mailing-list e-mails, or blog posts may lack.” Buchsbaum (2022) suggests that, “For fan binders, making physical art objects counters obsolescence and data loss and provides a break from the screen, traversing a porous boundary between digital and physical fandom and a similar one between digital and material texts.” The description of these as art objects nods towards the fact that while books are functional technologies, they serve a variety of needs, only one of which is reading. The affordances of a book are different from those of a digital text, but not necessarily superior or inferior. In the creation of a printed text, there are many design considerations, particularly if part of the intention is to mimic or build upon the established norms of traditionally published novels. For example, while typography is often ‘invisible’ and perhaps considered by some as trivial, there are many factors which influence choosing a typeface, since typefaces have affective value and “are selected for both functional and emotional reasons.” (Dixon, 2019)

The recent current uprise in fanbinding may in part be due to the formation of large information-sharing communities such as the Renegade Bindery Discord server (Kennedy, 2022). Another factor may also be greater uptake in practical craft hobbies during the Covid-19 pandemic, when many people were restricted from

their normal activities. This heightened focus on fanbinding is certainly evident in the micro-fandom surrounding *Down to Agincourt*. *Down to Agincourt* (DtoA) is a series of novel-length fanfiction works begun in 2014 by the fan author Seperis and inspired by the CW series *Supernatural*. DtoA has gathered an active fan community and has itself inspired a large number of spin-off works (Stein 2018). It is, as one fan recently pointed out, longer than the Christian Bible at well over a million words, and has an unusually large number of original characters, as well as an interest in ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman history, although it takes as its starting point a single episode of *Supernatural* from season 5, ‘The End,’ which briefly explores an alternate apocalyptic universe.

Prior to 2020, there had been limited production of fan bound versions of this work including a small print run of a paperback copy of the first book typeset by a fan with professional book production experience, and individuals printing their own copies for personal use. A new wave of interest in the story, however, took place in 2020 (due in part to new instalments being published after a long hiatus), accompanied by a notable increase in fanbinding activity and interest. This included a multiplicity of illustrated covers being produced, individuals learning book binding skills to create hand bound, bespoke objects, and the distribution of typeset files to be used with print-on-demand services.

In the rest of this paper, we will describe different forms of fanbinding practice we have observed and documented in this fandom, including many fans who seek to obtain printed copies of this work without necessarily undertaking binding practices themselves. We look at *Down to Agincourt* print books as examples of a particular form of transformative work, and also examine this as design practice, taking a design research approach to examine the different factors—*aesthetic, affective, practical and iterative*—that influence design decisions made during the production and distribution process of these works. We address the following research questions: Why do people desire printed copies, in some cases enough to make them? What design decisions go into creating fanbinding? Is there something about DtoA that particularly lends itself to this fan expression? How do affordances change as a piece of fanfiction moves from digital to printed?

Method and Ethics

To undertake this research, we used a mixed-methods methodology, including observation, auto-ethnography, surveys, and interviews, which provided a range of qualitative and quantitative data.

As members of the *Down to Agincourt* fan community ourselves, we are able to examine our own experience of and interaction with fanbinding practices, as well as having observed over several years the activities in this particular

community. This was the inspiration for the topic of research. As a result of this, we developed and deployed an online survey targeted primarily at DtoA fans to investigate attitudes towards and practices of fanbinding. The anonymous survey was hosted using Qualtrics (which holds data securely) and distributed online in various ways including the DtoA social media fan accounts on Twitter and Tumblr run by the authors, and in a number of Discord servers either primarily dedicated to discussing DtoA or where *Supernatural* fans had set aside an area to discuss this particular work. 225 valid responses were collected over a three-month period between 20th January 2022 and 26th April 2022, of which 188 completed all questions in the survey. Respondents were widely ranging in age, with the largest cohort in the 21-30 age bracket. The majority of the respondents who were happy to give information on their gender identified themselves as cis-gendered women, along with a smaller percentage of respondents who were non-binary, trans men or other.

At completion of the survey, participants who indicated they had created fan bound books themselves were asked if they wished to participate in follow up interviews to discuss these practices further. Four participants gave their contact details and each participated in interviews lasting approximately 1 hour each. Three of these were conducted over video-call using Microsoft Teams and one as a text-only conversation using Discord (at the request of the participant). We have allocated pseudonyms (Joe, Mira, Amanda and Teresa) to our interviewees, as well as to another fan whom we are here calling Wendy, who was not interviewed but whose books were mentioned by many survey respondents, and consented to her work being described here.

Ethics

All research detailed here has been reviewed and approved by the Lancaster University Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Ethics board. With the exception of Seperis, who has given consent to be referred to by this name and to the inclusion of her works in this research, all individuals named in the results and discussion below have been allocated pseudonyms by the researchers, and have given consent to be referred to in this anonymised manner. In some cases, survey respondents referred to fanbinding instances by individuals from whom we were unable to gain consent. In these cases we have described the context without providing identifying information. All photographs used here were supplied by the interviewed participants and approved for use in this work, or were supplied by the authors.

The community spaces in which ethnographic observation was carried out were fully informed of the research, its purpose, and the nature of any reporting on the observations. No direct quotes or identifiable information has been included here from any of these community spaces. The results of this research have also

been disseminated to these communities, in the form of invitations to attend the (online, free) conference at which this work was first presented. Links to published papers resulting from the work will also be made available in the venues which the research recruitment originally took place.

Fanbinding Ownership and Desire

We found that 96% of our survey respondents had read *Down to Agincourt*, and around a third of these (32%) owned printed copies. 93% of those who did not yet own copies said they would like to, though a smaller percentage (71%) were interested in owning printed copies of other fanfiction. When we asked those who said they were interested in copies of *Down to Agincourt* why they did not have them yet, the most common reason (27%) was not knowing how to get them, with another common response (25%) being that they were waiting until the series or latest book is complete. Other reasons given included not having money, time, or skills, and a small percentage (5%) said they hadn't previously known about them.

Many different editions have been produced, however only of 12% of our respondents who owned copies said that they had created any aspect of their own copies. It was far more common to own copies designed by other fans, with 43% using files shared by another fan with a commercial print on demand service such as lulu.com. This indicates that owning the copies is as much if not more of a motivation than the design and craft process itself for many fans. Among those whose copies we could identify by their description, the most commonly owned were those created by Mira and Wendy, who created two sets of covers each. Fig. 1 shows the most popular set designed by Wendy which mimics or offers an homage to mid-century pulp editions of classic science fiction novels. They feature colourful titles and black-and-white illustrations which include images of the characters adapted from screenshots of *Supernatural* episode 'The End'.



Figure 1. 'Pulp editions' designed by Wendy
(Photograph supplied by authors)



Figure 2. 'Sunrise editions' designed by Mira (Photographs supplied by Mira)

Fig. 2 shows the most popular set designed by Mira. This features spines which depict an abstraction of a slowly rising sun, inspired in part by a 1946 edition of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* with crumbling pillars. In this case, the sun's rising progress is, as described by Mira, symbolic of the series' emphasis on hope and the promise of human effort (as she puts it, "personal growth and change and community").

The 'sunrise' and 'pulp scifi' versions shown in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 were of fairly equal popularity. Several respondents owned multiple copies of the books, which may include those created by both Wendy and Mira.

Why did people feel particularly drawn to having printed copies of Down to Agincourt? Many people simply expressed their affective connection to the work. For example, in talking about this, one respondent said: "*The printed book is not just the book, it's the physical expression of, this fic meant something powerful to me, enough to own it in brickspace.*" This accords with the findings of Buchsbaum (2022) that "binders love the fic they bind". Another major theme, which echoes findings of Kennedy (2022), was permanence, preservation, and the idea that these books last a long time. One respondent said "*I will still have this book when I'm old (and I hope it really confuses the people who clear out my stuff when I die).*" The question of what happens in the long term to these books is one which has come up several times in the Discord communities, with some fans noting that they have included the books in their will to ensure they are treated appropriately after their death.

Many respondents mentioned tangibility of physical books, and the sensory experience of reading on paper. "*I think it is fantastic having something tangible that I can mark, like I can put a bookmark someplace, I can...read, reread. I can flip back. I can flip ahead without losing my spot.*" Respondents often mentioned affordances of print books including accessibility, affordability and, in one case,

the opportunities for lending a physical book. Printed books provide the means to include supplemental material such as maps and illustrations, the ability to annotate and navigate text; size and shape and portability, and offline reading and preservation.

These factors are similar to the motivations of wider fanbinding practice, however, many respondents distinguished DtoA from other fanfiction in terms of its length, or complexity. One respondent suggested “*DtoA is unique in its world building and details & relevant info.*” This connects to recurrent themes of fans wanting to annotate or reread the books. Many respondents expressed a desire to annotate, and discussed the fact that this book in particular lends itself to note taking and rereading: “*I wanted a physical version to hold and read at leisure so I could make notes in the margins and highlight it on future rereads*”.

Design in Down to Agincourt fanbinding

In our interviews, we explored further the specific design decisions and motivations of those who designed and created Down to Agincourt material. We identified four key design aspects which influenced this; affective, aesthetic, practical and iterative.

The *affective* aspect reiterates the finding described above that emotional attachment to the text is a major factor in fanbinding. While more than one interviewee mentioned the pandemic as a factor in both their reading of Down to Agincourt and their binding of it as an activity they could do during lockdowns, Joe described something our interviewees had in common: a special affective pleasure in creating. He states, “*The joy/power of being able to just create things I want to have is unbelievable, and I intend to use it whenever I can. [...] I gifted a friend of mine a bound fic for her birthday last year. It was a delight to make and to give.*”

Many design choices related to the *aesthetic* qualities of the books being produced, which vary significantly in terms of style, appearance, material and other features. For example, Wendy’s ‘pulp’ editions incorporate several features which are intended to give the illusion that these are books which have been pre-owned, and perhaps found serendipitously in a second-hand book sale. This includes trompe de l’oeil styling which mimics creased edges (see Fig. 1) and on the first volume, a price sticker which has been added, overlaid and then half removed. In the interiors, on the first page is a ‘handwritten’ note which says ‘Property of Sam Winchester’ completing the immersive idea that these books themselves were previously owned by one of the characters (and referencing a box of such well-loved SF classics that features in the narrative). The interiors are typeset in Baskerville Classico 10pt and include illustrations.

By contrast, Mira chose a more abstract and traditional aesthetic for her ‘sunrise’ editions, with symbolic meaning as described above. Many of the survey

respondents mentioned these aesthetic qualities as influencing their choice of which to obtain: *“I loved the way the Sunrise version looked side by side on a bookshelf...The minimal design is very nice too and makes them look like real published books.”* Such comparisons to ‘real books’ were a recurring theme, whether indicating that a print copy made the fic more ‘real’, or suggesting that DtoA itself has qualities of ‘realness’ which lend itself to the printed medium: *“Nothing has ever felt as much as a regular book series as down to agincourt to me.”*

The comparison to ‘real books’ includes respectability and subtlety aspects: *“With fanbinding it makes it seem like yeah, they are books. They’re not just silly stories online. They’re books.”* We found that many people said they preferred editions that did not feature images of the actors. There was a desire to be able to display the books on their shelf, but not something that would cause embarrassment if recognised as fanfiction in public: a mysterious object which is recognisable to the respondent (and other fans) as representing their emotional tie to the work and the community surrounding it, but opaque to those from outside the in-group who might see it and wonder at its provenance.

Our interviewees also mentioned typeface selection as being extremely important to them, and most chose a classic serif book font such as Garamond, possibly to emphasise Down to Agincourt’s literary qualities. They also chose to include supplemental material, as front and back matter and also in the form of illustrations and chapter headings; since maps and mapmaking feature heavily in DtoA, it is perhaps unsurprising that each of the fanbound editions includes a map of Kansas.

Many different techniques of binding are used by fans who created their own copies. Some choices are made for *practical* reasons, such as availability of materials. For example, Amanda taught herself glueing and stitching techniques for her hand-made copies of Down to Agincourt and its adjacent works by Seperis. These particular works are not typeset, but are printed-out PDFs from the archive, both perfect-bound (glued into a softcover at the spine) and hand stitched (see Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Selection of fanbinding designed by Amanda (Photograph supplied by Amanda)

Each book’s physical size and shape is a further practical design decision, as is where to divide or split the text into multiple volumes, since both *A Thousand Lights in Space* and *The Game of God* (books 3 and 4 in the series) are too lengthy to fit into a standard ‘octavo’ book size. Additionally, choice of material played a part in binding decisions, since handbound books are generally hardcover; for print-on-demand books, the end user can usually choose between paperback and hardback, with or without a slipcover (files for each format being made available by Wendy and Mira).

As noted above, the tangibility of physical books is a key motivation, particularly the ability to annotate and navigate the text afforded by hard copies. However, there are some affordances of digital books bring that are hard to recreate in print. For example, each book designer was faced with the choice of whether to include metadata as included on AO3. While most made use of the author’s synopsis, only Mira added in AO3 tags and dates of publication, in a traditional colophon (see Fig. 4). Mira has also recently created a bespoke annotated copy of the first book, for her own use, which includes a selection of reader comments. The community and interactive elements were mentioned by some respondents as reasons they value the digital versions of the books, as well as portability and ability to easily access many books without cost, and without them taking up space.

In the process of creating their books, fans learn and improve skills, and go through an *iterative* design process. Those who created their own books spoke about the skills they learned, often through joining communities of bookbinders or learning from online instructional materials, but also through collaborating within fan communities. These skills preserve craft practices that may otherwise be obscure, and can be taken forward into areas other than fandom. This includes digital skills such as typesetting and layout, sometimes using professional software packages. For example, Mira typeset her editions using LaTeX, from her prior experience with academic writing, though she notes that “if

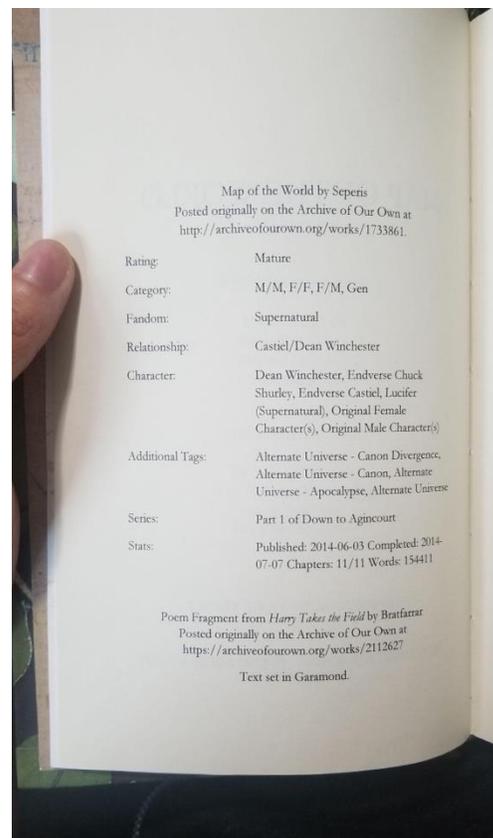


Figure 4. Metadata from AO3 included in one of Joe’s editions (Photograph supplied by Joe)

I had known [what] it could be to, like, tackle over a million words, I might not have done it.” From the initial files, made as a birthday gift for her sister, she then found herself making use of the physical affordances of books in crafting illustrations: *“The pages are see-through anyway so you can do some design that uses that, or you split up illustrations...the preceding page makes you want to turn that page and use it as a physical book.”* From experimenting with type design, she became interested in typesetting for its own sake, and has since read widely on design theory. In addition, her skillset extended to her modifying existing typefaces to add expert numeral sets, and teaching herself to use photo editing software, as well as creating and automating a Python script to aid in the preparation of the manuscript.

Mira said of her books that *“Designing them really got me interested in thinking about book design more and in wanting to design something that works best as physical objects.”* Her illustrations have been collected with annotations on their design into a handbound volume designed and created by another fan, Joe (Fig. 5). Joe taught himself stitching, glueing, and binding techniques as well as typesetting for his hand-made copies of *Down to Agincourt* (Fig 6). Joe is a member of the same Discord community that Wendy and Mira belong to, where he has documented his development process through his creation of these books. This includes the process of sourcing materials, decision-making about the precise form and layout of the illustration and interior material, and documenting processes such as the choice to create unique endpapers featuring a map with points burned out of it, referencing content in the story.

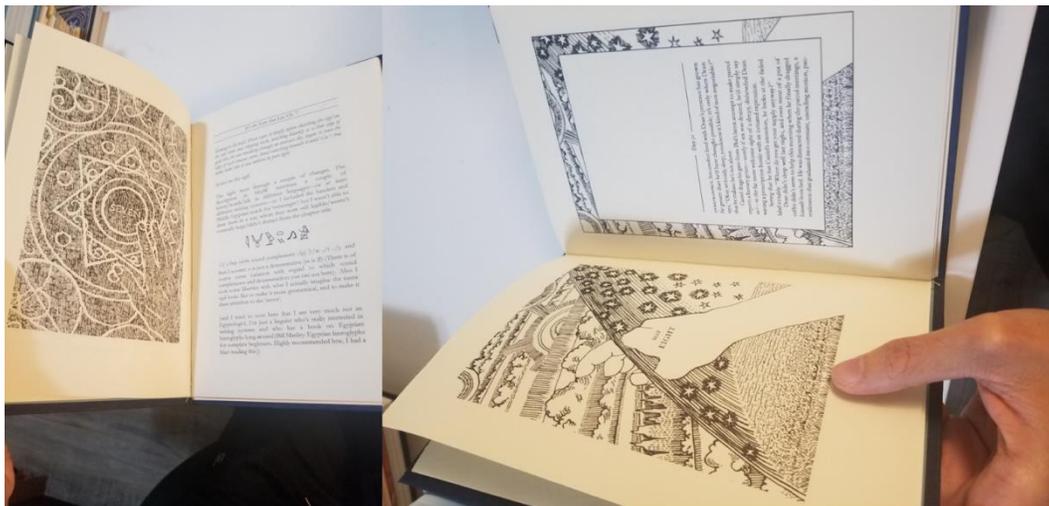


Figure 5. Bespoke binding of Mira’s illustrations and annotations on their design, designed by Joe. (Photographs supplied by Joe)



Figure 6. Clockwise from upper left: hand-stitched signatures, a hardback case to hold the resultant textblock, carefully burned endpapers, and typeset, illustrated front matter, all designed by Joe as part of his fanbinding process. (Photographs supplied by Joe)

As well as individual iterative learning and design, we found that those creating their books in collaboration with the community participated in communal iterative development of the books. For example, book designers had textual choices to make regarding copyediting. The original AO3 version contains some typographical and other potential errors, which meant setting and adhering to standards as to what constituted an error to be corrected, rather than an authorial idiosyncrasy or regionalism to be retained. Both Joe and Mira made use of a common document, a spreadsheet contributed to by users of the Discord server, in an effort to crowdsource errata.

We can thus see that the process of creating fanbound books includes many design decisions, and the acquisition of design skills. Fans involved in the creation of fanbinding must design not only the exterior cover, but interior typesetting, fonts, and layouts. They must make decisions about the inclusion of illustrations and other material, processing of the text such as copyediting, decide upon the binding and production techniques and materials to be used, and design, acquire, or create the

materials of the books themselves. Designing a fanbound text is therefore itself an act of transformative creation and design practice.

Conclusions

We have found that there are a huge range of design decisions that go into the creation of fanbound texts, which require fans to learn and share skills and knowledge. We found that affect is a major factor in people wishing to both create and own these texts. There is a strong desire on the part of many fans to own physical books of beloved fanfic, so much so that even those who do not have the skills, knowledge, or drive to create their own books still wish to acquire them through other means. Down to Agincourt in particular is tightly bound to its source text so a ‘file off the numbers’ approach will never be appropriate, and thus a commercial version of this story cannot ever be obtained. Yet people desire to own such books without necessarily having to put the work into creating them. In these cases, our findings indicate that aesthetics, design, and community involvement can be strong factors in choosing between several different options, or fans may seize upon simply the first opportunity which arises.

Those who wish to obtain printed copies of Down to Agincourt, and are members of the community that enables access to the products of other fans’ labour, can make choices based on particular features of the books that are based on the design decisions of those who made them. Some of these relate to physical features of the books, including not only the page, font and margin size, but also decisions about where to split some of the larger books which can only be comfortably printed if divided into a number of volumes. One respondent noted in regards their choice of edition: *“This version was made to be held comfortably which was a big factor.”*

When asked, around two thirds of the respondents mentioned the aesthetics or design as a major factor in choosing between versions. This includes people who mentioned having seen particular covers or editions and desiring to have their own: *“everyone on tumblr kept hyping it up and once I saw how beautiful people had made the physical copies I absolutely Had to read them.”* Respondents noted the visual appeal and attractiveness of the artwork and design, particularly of the covers. Some respondents also referenced the relevance of the design and appearance to the content itself. As one respondent suggested: *“the covers/files should still represent the soul of the story as best as possible, no matter the style used.”* This is particularly interesting in relation to the ‘pulp’ editions, which in their design incorporate aspects which traditionally might be seen as negative, such as ersatz damage from wear and tear.

Printed books offer many affordances which are absent from digital texts, from their sensory and tangible reading experiences, through the ability to annotate and read offline, and to permanence and display. With regards to this display

capacity, however, the opacity or transparency of the nature of these texts may be of variable desirability depending on how comfortable fans are with having recognisable fanfiction texts on their shelves or being read in public. A key finding from our work is that display is important to those obtaining these books, with some fans expressing a preference for the opacity of books which hide or obscure their fanfiction nature.

We would like to suggest that even when a fan is ‘only’ purchasing or printing out a bound work of fanfiction, and not creating or producing it themselves, the act of consumption is in itself a transformative act. Mira, for example, mentioned her frustration when people wanted to pay for the files, or offered to buy copies, in effect trying to commercialise the transaction; while fanbinding may be consumption in terms of material ownership, it is very much outside the realm of capitalist exchange, with a collaborative process around creation as well as an exchange that takes place firmly within a fannish gift economy.

Despite these many valued traits of printed books making them desirable, there are some affordances inherent to digital texts which cannot be replicated and transferred to the printed format. Designers creating printed copies must make choices about the inclusion of metadata, and most included only a limited selection of that which is associated with the original digital version, if any. Down to Agincourt as published in Archive of Our Own is a living, fluid text; not only because it is a work in progress and still incomplete, but also due to community contributions which include comments associated with the works themselves, and the ever-evolving collections of work inspired by and connected to the series. Both printed books as fixed preservation and digital texts as living organism have value in this case.

Down to Agincourt appears to have particular features which may contribute to its popularity with regards to fanbinding. Fans noted the complexity, literary qualities, and length of Down to Agincourt as particularly meriting the transferal to a tangible form. There is potential here for further research, looking at a broader selection of fanbound works, to consider whether there are common features across works that tend to be more commonly bound and/or distributed.

Ultimately, however fans create or acquire their copies of books, fanbinding is clearly an act of care and love, as well as personal desire made material.

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