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"I'm mixing comic book canon and mcu canon to suit my own needs": Information Sharing as Community Building in a Fandom in Flux

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Freeform tags on a James “Bucky” Barnes/Sarah Wilson fic:

bc i needed to make myself feel sappy and soft things,
some niche headcanons bc what else do i have to offer

Author’s Note on a James ‘Bucky’ Barnes/Sam Wilson one-shot:

“Written for the 2021 WinterFalcon Bingo – the square filled is ‘Domesticity’ :)”

Reader comment and author response on an Avengers drabble series:

“It’s so sweet it induces diabetes. I love it.” “Awwwh, thank you so much!”

INTRODUCTION

Archive of Our Own, or AO3 as it is more commonly referred to by the fandom community, is a volunteer-run fanfiction archive that houses over 11 million works from over 57,000 fandoms (Archive of Our Own, 2023). These works of fanfiction, shortened to fics, can range from very short ‘one-shots’ (single chapter fics) to works that dramatically surpass even *Remembrance of Things Past* in word count (*Longest Novel*, n.d.).¹ I am one of the millions of users that have joined AO3 since its creation in November of 2009. I spent over a decade on the platform as a ‘lurker’ – someone who did not have an account or leave feedback. Entry to the fandom community as anything other than a lurker always seemed somewhat out of reach for the very large fandoms that I wanted to be a part of. However, for the Marvel fandom the barriers to entry suddenly seemed to lower in the wake of the unprecedented expansion of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or MCU, to not only include their blockbuster movies, but also their new Disney + shows (Sheppard, 2023). The broader MCU fandom was rebuilding itself on a near monthly basis as new content was released and new fans flocked to find fan communities. Particularly ripe for the creation of fanfiction were shows like *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (FatWS). The show premiered in March of 2021 and allowed fans new and old to really explore the two titular characters. Sam Wilson and James “Bucky” Barnes, Falcon (later Captain America) and The Winter Soldier respectively, were given their first chance to be leading characters after many years and several movies where both played side characters to Steve Rogers (the original Captain America). While some of the larger aspects of the MCU and broader Marvel fandom can be more toxic and unwelcoming to those who have not been active since the beginning (Blodgett & Salter, 2018; Proctor & Kies, 2018), this combined ethnography and autoethnography study shows that the smaller FatWS

¹ *Remembrance of Things Past* by Marcel Proust, published in 1912, is the Guinness Book of World Records longest novel. It is approximately 1.5 million words. As of the first day of writing this paper, the longest fic on AO3 was 7,026,854 words long and was ongoing.

fandom community on AO3 is welcoming of newcomers, highly tolerant, and supportive. Throughout this paper, the autoethnography is reported on through the use of first-person vignettes at the beginning or end of each section.

“COMPLETE WORKS ONLY”: METHODOLOGY

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

*I scrolled down the page not really looking at anything in particular, not even catching any of the words the authors were using to signal to me that I should read their work. The page that I was skimming contained the twenty newest fics in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier (FatWS)* fandom, unfiltered. They all appeared to be in English, but when you are as unfocused as I was, it can be hard to tell given that tags are always in English regardless of the language of the fic. I scrolled back up and set some filters from the list of options on the right-hand side of the screen. They are second nature after so many years on AO3. I filtered for English and “Complete Works Only” and had to force myself not to sort the fics by kudos to get the most liked works listed first as I had already read all those. The filters cut the pool from 9,169 works to 7,355. My scrolling slowed way down this time. There are still only twenty fics to look at on the first page of the results, but they were what I actually wanted to be looking through to find my next read.*

The first fic had a generic, potentially angsty, title and was authored by a name I did not recognize, TooMuchCoffee. Immediately under that information was the list of fandom tags, followed by the relationship and character tags. The tag James ‘Bucky’ Barnes/Steve Rogers caught my eye, but since Sam Wilson is not even a character and The Falcon and the Winter Soldier (TV) was the last of four fandoms, I dismissed the work as another Captain America fandom fic that is being marketed to FatWS fans without any connection to the canon. I did not even bother reading the summary or looking at the engagement indicators.

The next work was much more intriguing. With tags like Captain America Sam Wilson, Joaquín Torres & Sam Wilson, Team as Family, and James ‘Bucky’ Barnes/Sam Wilson, this work definitely signaled that it was FatWS canon related. The title indicated that it is going to be an Avengers, or maybe a ‘New Avengers’ (something

that the broader MCU fandom believes is being set up through the current phase of movies and TV shows), fic and further study of the tags shows a lot more information being shared by the author. The only fandom tags are Marvel Cinematic Universe and The Falcon and the Winter Soldier (TV) (adding the overarching Marvel Cinematic Universe tag has appeared as a common convention of authors working on any MCU related fic), many of the show's characters appear in the tags, the author was working in a Alternate Universe – Everyone Lives/Nobody Dies world that allows one of my favorite MCU characters to be a part of the story, and there were plenty of cute trope tags. To make it even better, it was a long, multi-chaptered fic that had a high number of kudos and bookmarks. From there, it was an easy right click to open the fic in a new tab and dive into reading.

ETHNOGRAPHY

For the duration of the week of October 24th through October 30th, I conducted an ethnographic study of the FatWS fandom tag on AO3 using direct observational methods. Direct observation, rather than participant observation or interviews, was an appropriate method as it allowed the study to mirror the delayed real time nature of AO3 community participation. It also was consistent with the fact that there is no built-in direct messaging system on the site. All conversations taking place on the site are public, so an observational study wasn't missing any key components of the field site.

My goal was to explore the way a fandom community builds itself through information sharing. All aspects of information sharing via AO3 works were observed. These included titles, author usernames, all tag formats, summaries, all authors note formats, and comments. The actual content of the work was not a part of this study. No usernames were recorded during the observations in an effort to add an extra level of confidentiality. As such, any usernames mentioned in this paper are pseudonyms of the author's AO3 pseudonym. The observation yielded field notes on all aspects of information sharing on the 270 works published, completed, or updated throughout the study period. The autoethnographic work yielded field notes, but also consisted of a screen recording of my use of the site to find new FatWS fanfictions to read. I utilized iterative coding to engage in a grounded theory approach to the collected data. This coding process garnered findings from the four venues of information sharing on AO3 – tags, summaries and author notes, comments, and miscellaneous sources, however this paper will

primarily focus on how tags are vital to crafting community identity but also create barriers to entry within the FatWS fandom.

THE FALCON AND THE WINTER SOLDIER (TV), VENOM (MARVEL MOVIES) - DO I COUNT THIS AS A X-OVER?: AN AO3 TAG TAXONOMY

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The first thing I noticed about Alivewithwords16's fic was that they had tagged a series of fandoms unlike any I had seen during my observations, and in retrospect unlike any I would see in the remainder of my observations. The list read: Marvel, The Falcon and the Winter Soldier (TV), Sebastian Stan – Fandom, James Buchanan 'Bucky' Barnes – Fandom, Bucky Barnes – Fandom, Disney – All Media Types, Marvel (Comics). If I had been looking at this fic on my downtime, I would not have given any thought to scrolling right by. Alivewithwords16's need to over inform in this specific way would have signaled to my mind a fic that was hyper-focused on the actor, rather than the character he portrayed. However, this was not my downtime.

ETHNOGRAPHY

The tagging system is vital to AO3. This system allows authors to categorize the fics by canon material(s), characters, relationships, or tropes, and to apply other tags to aid their potential readers in finding appropriate fics. Studies have been conducted about the value of integrating a similar user-generated labeling system in other settings (Price, 2017, 2019). My observations in the FatWS fandom highlighted the dual use of tags by authors: tags-as-information and tags-as-conversation. Tags-as-information are tags that signal to the reader what they will find in the content of the fic and help the community sort the works they are looking for and find like-minded community members. Tags-as-conversation allow the author to engage in community and relationship building while still occasionally imparting content information. Tags-as-information span all forms of tags used on AO3, rating, archive warnings, category (pairing/relationship type), fandom, relationships, characters, and freeform. Tags-as-conversation only exist within the freeform tags format.

Rating, archive warnings, and category tags are highly structured by the archive's infrastructure. They present a very limited range of information, and though it is valuable when hoping to filter out certain types of content, there is very

little variation, and the tags have little impact on the specific fandom community. Fandom tags are also fairly rigid in their use, but they can be valuable in building community, specifically in signaling which works are meant for the smaller FatWS community and which are more broadly part of the Marvel community. The rigidity of these and other partially rigid tags comes from the community standardization that occurs. Moderators will often combine or alter tags like fandoms and characters for the ease of searching. My first reaction to the fandom tags that I was seeing during my observation was that the actual FatWS fandom was much smaller than it appeared. Many of the posted works had characteristics that were more broadly Marvel or were parts of other smaller fandoms in the Marvel universe that characters from FatWS appeared in. Less than 15% of the works published during the study were solely tagged with The Falcon and the Winter Soldier (TV) tag. If you added the works where FatWS was the first fandom in the list, the percentage went up to 41%, however position in the list of fandoms does not necessarily correlate with ties to FatWS canon. Fandom tags need to be used in conjunction with other tag forms and information sources for readers to understand the work's position in relation to the fandom community.

Similar to the fandom tags' rigidity, relationship and character tags are largely standardized tags that indicate the characters involved in the work and, if necessary, the relationships said characters are involved in. Character and relationship tags, despite their limits, allow the fandom community to understand the work's position in the broader Marvel fandom. Readers scanning through the James 'Bucky' Barnes/Sarah Wilson tag can be confident in the work's relationship to FatWS canon, given that Sarah Wilson was a new character in the MCU as of FatWS. On the other hand, if a reader scanning The Falcon and the Winter Soldier (TV) stumbled across the work with Steve Rogers/Tony Stark and the only FatWS related character is present is James 'Bucky' Barnes, they might conclude that the author was working in the Avengers fandom and attempting to reach a wider audience, rather than indicating any relationship to the FatWS fandom.

While these more rigid tags can be highly informative and indicative of community participation, community building through tags is the work of the authors, using the freeform format. These informational freeform tags require readers to have the ability to understand several layers of specialized languages. I developed a typology of informational freeform tags which can be subcategorized by their use of specialized language. Freeform informational tags that require the user to have some level of knowledge in the language used by fandoms in general include trope tags, some versions of alternate universe tags, some versions of warning tags, sexual content tags, and some versions of event tags. The tags that require knowledge of the language used by the Marvel fandom and the FatWS

fandom include fandom specific trope tags, canon time period tags, some versions of alternate universe tags, some versions of warning tags, and some versions of event tags. Not all of the tags need deep knowledge of fandom or inclusion in the Marvel/FatWS fandom to be understood, trope tags, alternate universe tags, warning tags, and sexually explicit tags often conform to logic that non-fans could follow.

DEAD DOVE: DO NOT EAT, BUT MAYBE EAT A LITTLE – IT IS A HAPPY ENDING: USE OF CROSS-FANDOM TAGS

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

There were a total of 43 tags on northtriangle's work. Seven of these tags were fandoms, four were relationships, fifteen were characters, and the final 17 were freeform tags. torture, emotional manipulation, dub con, hurt/no comfort, Cult AU, Dead Dove: Do Not Eat, This Is Not Going To Go The Way You Think, asexual character, perceived betrayal... The list was extensive and all I could think was that it was all over the place. I could not grasp what the story was going to contain, despite all of the tropes, content warnings, character identity, and other tags that the author was giving me. My bigger concern was that I could not identify whether it had more than a passing connection to the FatWS fandom.

ETHNOGRAPHY

Some of the most common tags I observed were trope tags. These tags were nearly universal in their use and are employed to explain what readers can expect from the plot of the story. Only works in the most extreme instances of an author refusing to inform showcased a complete lack of use of trope tags. Tags like slowburn, crack, hurt/comfort, and enemies to lovers were used across many fics and it was not uncommon for me to see at least one example of those four tags during an observational period (has this period been specified?). These tropes, along with countless others utilized by the authors during the study, are part of the barrier that newcomers to fanfiction must pass through. Some of the tropes can likely be classified as self-explanatory, enemies to lovers or found family come to mind. Other tropes require a certain level of broad fanfiction community knowledge, such as slowburn (a long lead up to a romantic pairing), crack (a fic with a fundamentally absurd or unbelievable premise), or wingfic (fics in which otherwise human characters are born with or at some point gain wings).

These trope tags that require community knowledge are rarely explained, authors expect that their readers know enough to understand them or can learn about them through their engagement with fanfiction. On very rare occasions an author may use tags to give additional context to the tropes they're using, which can allow newcomers to infer some idea of what the trope may be. Author *CuteBunny* tagged their work with Crack Treated Seriously, a variation on the crack tag that allowed newcomers to understand that the original tag must mean something lacking in seriousness if it can be treated seriously.

Similar to trope tags, alternate universe tags are employed to give the reader a way to understand what conceits the author is employing. An alternate universe transgresses boundaries of space and time, allowing fanfic authors to relocate the canon material into an alternate setting, for example an alternate universe where canon characters are reimagined as highschoolers (Thomas, 2011). Most of the time alternate universe tags, or AUs, are part of the cross-fandom language that fanfic readers employ. They tend to follow trends, for example High School – AU or Coffeeshop AU are both currently popular concepts for fics across many fandoms – including FatWS. I encountered these, plus the uncommon alternate universe tags Biker Club AU, AU Cult, and Beauty and the Beast AU. As long as newcomers have a grasp of the base premise of what the term AU means, they can extrapolate what the author is trying to tell them, meaning these are generally a low barrier to entry. On the other hand, an alternate universe tag like omegaverse requires a deep knowledge of fandom and its intersection with erotic literature. *DarkGoddess*, the author of one of the omegaverse fics, took steps to alleviate the barrier that this specific AU presents by supplementing their tagging of the fic with an author's note that went into limited detail about the AU and, in a singular event during my observations, linked to a work that is a guide to the specifics of the WinterBaron (a fandom nickname for the relationship pairing James “Bucky” Barnes/Helmut Zemo) omegaverse that another author had created.

Finally, warning tags fill a particularly necessary requirement in an author's attempts at community building on AO3. Warning tags, or trigger warnings, can follow a number of patterns, but all of them are used out of respect for the community at large. I want to note that it is necessary to differentiate between warning tags and sexual content tags. Sexual content tags should not be conflated with warnings about violence, non-consensual sexual encounters, underaged characters involved in sexual encounters, and other common warning tags. As mentioned earlier in this paper, AO3 has a rating system where explicit works are rated E based on agreed upon community standards. Sexual content tags, some of which can be extremely explicit, are not inherently a warning, as they can be used by readers who are looking for specific preferences. They are an additional form of

information that allows the community members to sort and recognize their shared preferences and differences. Warning tags, on the other hand, are placed with the explicit intent to alert community members to content that is known to be troubling. These warnings are sometimes extremely clear: non-con elements, sexual assault, emotional manipulation, canon-typical violence. Sometimes they are self-explanatory and don't require fandom community knowledge but are extremely vague: problematic for many reasons.

The most challenging warning tags are the ones that require extensive fanfiction community knowledge to truly understand. The heading of this section is an example of one such tag. Dead Dove: Do Not Eat refers to a scene in the TV show *Arrested Development*, in which the lead character finds a paper bag in the freezer that is labeled "Dead Dove: Do Not Eat." He opens the bag to see that it is in fact a dead dove and deadpans "I don't know what I expected." I have been a long-time reader of fanfiction and only in the last few months had I actually gotten curious about where this tag came from. I had a general knowledge that the phrase was meant to signal to readers that they should be wary of this fic and that it probably had questionable content. After discovering the source material for the tag, I believed a more accurate definition of the tag would probably be that readers should mind the other warnings, that the work is going to contain exactly what it says it will. My new understanding of the Dead Dove: Do Not Eat tag was challenged by *Stitch* who I observed using the tag chain Dead Dove: Do Not Eat, But maybe eat a little – it is a happy ending, implying that my original understanding of the tag was correct. This short explanation of my own confusion highlights a potential barrier for newcomers, one that I never saw authors attempting to alleviate. Rather, this highlights that while the FatWS community members do value their fellows, as evidenced by the high rate of warning tags appearing, there are still areas where more support could be given to those who have less general fandom knowledge.

JOHN WALKER IS HIS OWN WARNING: FANDOM SPECIFIC TAGGING FOR COMMUNITY IDENTIFICATION

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

I knew immediately that this was a fic directly aimed at the FatWS community. Beyond the fandom tags, relationship tags, and character tags, the freeform tags spoke volumes. The author was waving a flag to their community to get us to come running. Freeform tags told us when in the canon it was going to take place, Post-Episode: s01e06 One World One People, how they felt about the new character in the MCU, John Walker Is His Own Warning, and how they were going to treat Bucky and Sam, Sam is a Good Friend, Bucky Barnes Needs A Hug.

ETHNOGRAPHY

A subset of tags exist that require community members to speak a more specialized language than the previously mentioned tags. Where trope tags are often used cross-fandom, Marvel/FatWS trope tags are highly individualized. The trope tags that I observed being utilized during this study tended to be more applicable to the broader MCU or Marvel fandom. Darcy Lewis is the fandom bicycle, IronDad, and avengers family are all MCU specific tags that make little sense to the general fanfiction community and likely sound completely irrational to people removed from fandom altogether. In some cases, Marvel/FatWS trope tags are readily explained in further tags or by the author in other areas. For example, in the instance I observed of the use of the tag IronDad, the trope was expanded upon by use of the relationship tag of Peter Parker & Tony Stark (the ampersand denoting a platonic or familial relationship rather than a romantic one, which is a standard tagging convention across AO3) and the summary that included the background context of Tony Stark having adopted Peter Parker. These types of trope tags also can be extremely valuable to the fandom community. In the case of IronDad, the author's use of the tag, when looked at in the context of the other tags presented, is a red flag to the FatWS community that this fic is likely not for them – since neither Tony Stark nor Peter Parker appear in the show. Beyond tropes specific to the fandom, there are also alternate universes that require insider knowledge of the FatWS fandom to understand. The tag power broker theory: not applicable is a reference to a plot twist revealed late in the first season. If a Marvel comics fan or an MCU fan that had not watched the FatWS series saw that tag it would not hold any meaning. Whereas, to someone who watched FatWS, it is a tag that indicates that

the author is creating an alternate universe where a controversial plot point is being negated.

Warning tags that are fandom specific present a particular challenge. They both signal to community members that this is for the community, but also can be potentially high barriers for newcomers to attempt to navigate. The header to this chapter is the FatWS community's version of a tag that exists across multiple fandoms. In nearly all fandoms there is a character that people nearly universally dislike, for good reason. The tag can look like Ramsey Bolton Is His Own Warning in the *Game of Thrones* fandom or Delores Umbridge Is Her Own Warning in the *Harry Potter* fandom, for FatWS the tag is John Walker Is His Own Warning. While this presents a barrier to those not in the community, it is fairly accessible to those with fandom insider knowledge. On the other hand, the tag from the broader MCU/Marvel fandom that is frequently brought into FatWS fics due to the presence of Bucky Barnes, Hydra Trash Party, can be very difficult to parse for newcomers. The tag refers to the unfathomable amount of trauma that Barnes suffered at the hands of Hydra for several decades. It is used as a shorthand trigger warning for all manner of potentially concerning content, most notably any sort of mental and emotional manipulation. However, because those trigger warnings are implied rather than explicitly stated, the community risks newcomers not understanding the gravity of a tag like Hydra Trash Party and potentially not being turned away from a fic that is not in their best interest to read.

Another informational freeform tag is those that indicate timelines within canon. This form of tagging came as a surprise to me during the observation. Similar types of tags exist in other large fandoms, such as Harry Potter where they need to be able to indicate which generation or decade that the fic is set in, however the canon timeline of FatWS is very short, so I did not anticipate this type of information being shared. There were very few instances of these types of tags, but they appeared to have two styles, highly specific and general. The general tag would only indicate that the fic was post-canon: post-tfatws. The highly specific tag presents a barrier that even fans might be hard pressed to cross without looking back at plot synopses: Post-Episode: s01e06 One World One People.

Through tags such as those discussed in this section, the community finds ways to allow entry and build community identity. These highly fandom specific tags will develop over time as the fandom community grows. Currently the tags directly related to FatWS rather than the broader Marvel fandom are a low barrier to entry for new community members, but if the community is going to co-opt tags from the Marvel community (e.g., Hydra Trash Party) the community needs to find ways to keep those from alienating newcomers.

“NO BETA WE DIE LIKE THANOS”: A CONCLUSION

Building a community identity without engaging in back-and-forth conversation is a challenge that fanfiction writers have been overcoming in their practice. Some authors on AO3 choose to attempt to engage the community off site where there is more room for interpersonal interactions. These authors would be those I observed using their author’s notes to give their Twitter or tumblr handles (both hyperlinked and not) or suggest Discord servers to join (WinterBaron was a particularly popular one). Some authors created community by letting their readers into their personal life in small ways in their notes (“Sorry this is late – I’ve spent the last month in the hospital.”) or by suggesting other authors or fanwork artists that the readers may like. Others choose to build community by engaging with readers in the comments (“*shakes tin can* audience participation time...”). But – however else authors chose to engage, they all use tags.

I knew when I was scrolling through the new fics that I was in the right place. I was not able to chat with them in any meaningful way as I sought out new connections, but they were able to send me signs that this fic was for me. They used all sorts of tags to signal that this fic was a part of our community. It was always a good feeling to spot Sam Wilson is a Good Bro, or BAMF Joaquín Torres, or domestic feels on a James ‘Bucky’ Barnes/Sarah Wilson fic. It felt like the authors were leaving the porch light on for me, so that I could find my way home.

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