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Everyday Cosplay: Costume Adaptation and the Fan Fashion Industry

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Everyday Cosplay:
Costume Adaptation and
the Fan Fashion Industry

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Film and Television

by

Lauren Debra Boumaroun

2023

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Everyday Cosplay:
Costume Adaptation and
the Fan Fashion Industry

by

Lauren Debra Boumaroun
Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television
University of California, Los Angeles, 2023
Professor Deborah Nadoolman Landis, Co-Chair
Professor Denise R. Mann, Co-Chair

This dissertation explores the fan fashion industry and the practice of adapting costumes into everyday clothing from 2010-2020. The 2010s can be seen as the beginnings of a second "golden age of cinema fashions," when the supply and demand for film and television-inspired clothing started to peak. As a result of cultural and industrial shifts throughout the 2000s due to the rise of digital technologies and social media, transmedia franchises became the norm, while licensed merchandise and brand partnerships gained renewed importance as ways to make up for profit losses from streaming sites and an overcrowded content marketplace. The prevalence of social media catalyzed the mainstreaming of fan practices in addition to making it easier for the media industry to capitalize on the labor of online fan communities. Convergence culture and the influence of

neoliberal ideals form the context for an exploration of costume designers' and fans' creative labor, personal identity, and the meaning and value of fan fashion.

Fan fashion provides a space for costume designers and fans to play with IP and offer personalized contributions to the transmedia story world. However, work-for-hire contracts and strict licensing guidelines ensure that IP owners maintain legal and economic control. Although many media workers and fans view the system as exploitative, they are forced to operate within it. So, while they continue to push for proper compensation for their labor, costume designers and fans often focus on the symbolic rewards they receive, like press, experience, and a social network. Through a series of case studies, I illuminate the different ways fan fashion manifests itself, the exploitative aspects of the industry, and the tactics used by costume designers, fans, and their supporters to advocate for change.

The dissertation of Lauren Debra Boumaroun is approved.

John T. Caldwell

Henry Jenkins

Deborah Nadoolman Landis, Committee Co-Chair

Denise R. Mann, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2023

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his sincere interest in my research and positive feedback provided a much-needed boost that helped carry me those difficult final months. I have long been a fan of his work and feel lucky to have the insight of an experienced fan studies scholar on my committee.

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Completing a PhD program is challenging, and I would not have been able to do it without my fellow graduate students. I am thankful for my cohort, whose feedback during the prospectus writing process made all of us into stronger writers and scholars: Lindsay Affleck, Jess DePrest, Mohannad Ghawanmeh, Todd Kushigemachi, and Adrien Sebro. During the editing process, Todd assisted me in sorting through my ideas and letting me know if I was making sense or just writing gibberish. Lindsay and Jess were part of a weekly writing group I organized, along with Heather Birdsall, Michael Reinhard, and Monica Sandler. They kept me accountable and offered me priceless moral support.

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EDUCATION

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Master of Arts in Visual Culture: Costume Studies, 2011
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CONFERENCE & SYMPOSIUM PRESENTATIONS

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"Geek Girl Power: Identity, Community, and Fan-Made Fashion," Fashion, Costume, and Visual Culture Conference, July 10, 2019, Roubaix, FR.

"Fashionistas of Fandom: Culture and Community in the Geek Fashion Industry," Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, March 13, 2019, Seattle, WA.

"Whose Design is it Anyway?: The Ethics of Screen Costume Adaptation," Critical Costume Conference, September 14, 2018, Guildford, UK.

"Red States, Red Robes: *The Handmaid's Tale* Cosplay as a Symbol of Resistance," Fashion, Costume, and Visual Culture Conference, July 18, 2018, Zagreb, Croatia.

"Costume Designer/Everything: Hybridized Identities in Animation Production 2.0," invited speaker, Film Costume / State of the Art Symposium, October 21, 2017, New York University, New York, NY.

"Becoming Annie: When Costume and Fashion Converge," The End of Fashion Conference, December 8, 2016, Wellington, New Zealand.

"Costume Designer/Everything: Hybridized Identities in Animation Production," Consoleing Passions Conference, June 16, 2016, Notre Dame, IN.

"The Clothes Make the Lawyer: Intertextuality and Aspirational Dressing in *Better Call Saul,*" The Full Cleveland: Costume Society of America National Symposium, May 27, 2016, Cleveland, OH.

"Ongoing Development: Costume as a Serial Device in *Arrested Development,*" Popular Culture Association National Conference, April 3, 2015, New Orleans, LA.

"Dressing the Future: Costume in Sci-Fi Films," Reflecting Forward: Costume Society of America National Symposium, May 29, 2014, Baltimore, MD.

"Fashion, Conformity, & Costume," Fashion & Film: Costume Society of America Regional Symposium, January 11, 2014, Richmond, VA.

PUBLICATIONS

"Flying Under the Radar: Culture and Community in the Unlicensed Geek Fashion Industry" In *Sartorial Fandom: Fashion, Beauty Culture, and Identity*, edited by Elizabeth Affuso and Suzanne Scott, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023.

"'The Villain in My Own Story': Representations of Depression and the Spectatorial Experience." In *Perspectives on* Crazy Ex-Girlfriend: *Quality Post-Network Television*, edited by Amanda Konkle & Charles Burnetts, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2020.

"Costume Designer/Everything: Hybridized Identities in Animation Production." In *Framework* 59, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 7-31.

"Becoming Annie: When Costume and Fashion Converge." In "Fashion and the Moving Image," ed. Vicki Karaminas and Hilary Radner, special issue, *Fashion Theory* 21, no. 6 (Fall 2017): 647-666.

WORK EXPERIENCE

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences — Los Angeles, CA
Cultural Equity and Inclusion Project Intern — Jan-May 2019

- Researched LGBTQIA films and filmmakers through scholarly texts and the internet
- Assisted archive in identifying relevant holdings and suggested potential acquisitions
- Built an annotated bibliography of secondary sources related to LGBTQIA cinema

Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising Museum — Los Angeles, CA
Museum Volunteer — October 2018

- Assisted with the deinstallation of FIDM's annual TV costume exhibit
- Completed condition reports for outgoing costumes

University of California- Los Angeles — Los Angeles, CA
Havas Media/UCLA TFT Digital Incubator and Think Tank — Sept 2016-June 2018

- Co-wrote a white paper on the synthesis of social media and ecommerce
- Performed in-depth research on how studios can benefit from partnerships with ecommerce companies that target film and television fans

University of California- Los Angeles — Los Angeles, CA
Research Assistant for Deborah Nadoolman Landis — Sept 2015-Mar 2016

- Researched topics related to costume design and film
- Wrote two proposals for potential exhibits at the V&A Museum in London

The Gap, Inc. — New York, NY
Design Archive Processing Assistant — Aug-Oct 2010

- Supported archive staff prior to and during design archive's re-housing
- Input detailed descriptions of apparel in catalogue system
- Re-housed items in new design archive

NBC Universal Archives — Universal City, CA
Wardrobe & Prop Archive Intern — May-Jun 2010

- Catalogued archive's holdings using TMS (The Museum System) database
- Created boxes and mounts for objects in prop and costume storage
- Padded and dressed mannequins for exhibition at NBCUniversal Experience museum

INTRODUCTION: A SECOND GOLDEN AGE

In March 2015, Hot Topic started pre-orders for its "Clones" licensed fashion collection based on the BBC America television series *Orphan Black* (2013-2017). With headlines like "Hot Topic's *Orphan Black* Line Lets You Be a Project Leda Clone"[1] and "Now You Can Join the Clone Club with the *Orphan Black* Fashion Collection,"[2] the press surrounding the collection emphasized the chance to immerse oneself in *Orphan Black*'s story world and embody the characters through clothing—to *be* one of the clones. Collections like this, while not necessarily new, are unique in their ability to offer a personal connection to the story when compared to standard licensed merchandise. *Nylon*'s Gabrielle Korn presented the collection as a tangible way to identify with characters, saying "not all merch is created equal, and we're not talking just T-shirts and mugs: Hot Topic is launching a line of clothes inspired by the different clones, so that if you see yourself as a Cosima or are *totally* a Sarah, well, now you can dress the part."[3] Costume designers often state that "the costume is the character." Accordingly, when we don the clothing of a fictional character, we have the potential to take on their characteristics as well—become them, to an extent.

When describing the "Clones" collection, *Entertainment Weekly* writer Isabella Biedenharn moves from similes ("dress in leather and hoodies like Sarah Manning") to metaphorical language ("try on Helena's bloody angel wing cuts, or wrap Cosima Niehaus's

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[1] Teresa Jusino, "Hot Topic's *Orphan Black* Line Lets You Be a Project Leda Clone," *The Mary Sue,* March 23, 2015, https://www.themarysue.com/hot-topic-orphan-black/.

[2] Stubby the Rocket, "Now You Can Join the Clone Club with the *Orphan Black* Fashion Collection," *Tor.com,* March 24, 2015, https://www.tor.com/2015/03/24/orphan-black-fashion-collection-hot-topic/.

[3] Gabrielle Korn, "Orphan Black Gets a Clothing Line," *Nylon*, March 23, 2015, https://www.nylon.com/articles/orphan-black-hot-topic-clothing-line.

skull scarf around your neck"),[4] emphasizing that these are actually part of the story world and tied directly to the characters—you can try on *their* clothes and thus, their identities. The fannish tendency to play with narrative is no longer restricted to so-called "hardcore" fans. Even those who would once have been considered casual viewers want to feel a connection to the story, like Teresa Jusino who wants to "rock out at the next Clone Club dance party in that Helena shirt!," referring to the season 2 finale of the series that feature the clones dancing together.[5] Laura Prudom, writing for *Variety*, uses a similar rhetorical device when stating that Hot Topic was offering a pre-sale "for sestras who just can't wait to declare their Clone Club allegiance," using *sestra* as a reference to what the clones call one another (sister) and inviting people to put themselves into the narrative.[6] Hot Topic regularly released collections like these throughout the 2010s and are a key player in the fan fashion industry, which is the focus of this dissertation.

The items in the "Clones" collection ranged from near-exact replicas of costume designer Debra Hanson's work to more creative adaptations of her designs for the four main clones: Sarah, Cosima, Alison, and Helena (all played by Tatiana Maslany). However, despite the similarity to Hanson's work, she was not involved in the design or production of the collection, nor did she receive credit or compensation. In Hot Topic's press release for the collection, senior VP of merchandising and marketing Cindy Levitt says, "We are obsessed with 'Orphan Black' here at Hot Topic, and are ecstatic to be given the opportunity to work with the amazing team at Temple Street to design a collection… The detail in each

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[4] Isabella Biedenharn, "'Orphan Black' gets a Hot Topic clothing line," *EW.com*, March 24, 2015, https://ew.com/article/2015/03/24/orphan-black-gets-hot-topic-clothing-line/.

[5] Jusino, "Hot Topic's *Orphan Black* Line Lets You Be a Project Leda Clone."

[6] Laura Prudom, "Hot Topic Launches 'Orphan Black' Clothing Line," *Variety.com*, March 24, 2015, https://variety.com/2015/tv/news/orphan-black-hot-topic-clothing-line-1201459311/.

clone's outfit is so tied to her character and personality that you have to look more than once to catch everything… These pieces were so much fun to create."[7] Based on this quote, the marketing frames the collection as something entirely original created collaboratively between Hot Topic executives and Temple Street, *Orphan Black*'s production company. The statement erases the creative labor of costume designer Debra Hanson, without whom the collection would not have been possible.

Long known as an "alternative" brand, Hot Topic present themselves as a fan-run, fan-driven company. Levitt uses words like "obsessed" and "ecstatic" to reinforce the company's fannish investment in the collection. However, despite once relying on selling punk rock and metal band t-shirts, they are, like any corporation, driven by profits. After several film-inspired collections, this was Hot Topic's first collection based on a television series, according to Temple Street Productions managing director John Young, who saw the collaboration with Hot Topic as something that "further solidifies our audience's connection with this show and further extends the 'Orphan Black' brand beyond the smallscreen. We are excited for the fans to get their hands on these collectable items."[8] Like Levitt, Young foregrounds fans and their desires, but does not play the part of the fan. Rather, he is more practical about the usefulness of the collection in extending the show's brand, serving as a paratext and part of the transmedia story world. It does not exist simply because people at Hot Topic are fans of the show, the collection serves a purpose in providing fans with a material way of engaging with the series while bringing in profits for the retail brand and production company (but not the costume designer).

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[7] Prudom, "Hot Topic Launches 'Orphan Black' Clothing Line."

[8] Prudom, "Hot Topic Launches 'Orphan Black' Clothing Line."

The success of licensed collections like the *Orphan Black* collection suggests that a substantial number of people also want to look and dress like the fictional characters they admire in everyday life. This is not surprising, for if media affect our sense of self and our identity is expressed to a great degree through clothing, then our clothing would likely reflect our media engagement. It is also not surprising that studios and television networks capitalize on this desire to bring screen costume into the everyday, offering costume replicas and variations on their own websites and partnering with fashion brands and retailers through licensing deals and design collaborations. Thus, a range of commercial products exist that result from a negotiation between a variety of creative professionals working within different industrial structures that encourage media viewers' immersive engagement in fictional story worlds. Although these collections capitalize on the labor of film and television costume designers, they are often not involved in their creation, even though their connection to the IP and cultural capital can add significant value to licensing deals and fan fashion.

The "Clones" collection is one of several similar case studies I refer to throughout this dissertation, which focuses on the adaptation of film and television costumes and characters into everyday clothing. Licensed fashions are often subsumed under the larger area of licensing, while unlicensed fashions are often lumped in with other fan-made goods. However, as I will demonstrate, these two areas together form a complex costume adaptation industry that is worthy of study as its own entity. This project explores the creative labor, identity negotiation, pleasures, and struggles of adapting film and television costumes and characters into everyday clothing. Through an analysis of case studies focusing on specific collections, designers, and fashion brands, such as WeLoveFine and Hot Topic, I illuminate larger issues surrounding the power struggle over ownership and authorship and the value of creative labor. My goal is to highlight the voices of designers

and fans and the skills they have developed to survive in the contemporary creative industries.

TERMINOLOGY

As this is a relatively new area of study and no universal terminology has been agreed upon yet, it is important to discuss the terms I will use and how I define them. I use the term *costume adaptation* to refer to clothes directly inspired by screen costumes. Like screen adaptations of literary works, these clothes range from faithful replicas to creative re-workings that bear minimal resemblance to the original source. Consequently, they provide entry points along a *cosplay continuum* offering various levels of engagement with fictional film and television story worlds through clothing. On one end, there are the clothes that most closely resemble original screen costumes and are usually worn in specific contexts, such as fan conventions. On the other end are adaptations that capture the aura of the original costume through subtler references and can therefore be worn anywhere. My reference to a continuum is meant to suggest that cosplay is practiced to different degrees, for different reasons, and by a variety of people ranging from casual viewer to hardcore fan. The "lighter" versions of cosplay, or *everyday cosplay*, may involve a subtler reference to the original screen costumes and a more internalized performance. These are more aligned with the principles of *Disneybounding*, which typically "uses wardrobe staples… to create the looks for your favorite… characters."[9] Nevertheless, in all scenarios people are engaging with media through clothing.

While not all costume adaptations are based on traditionally "geeky" properties, the most visible, accessible, and prevalent tend to be based on media that falls within geek culture. Thus, the clothing used for the practice of everyday cosplay is often referred to as

[9] Leslie Kay, *DisneyBound: Dress Disney and Make it Fashion* (New York: Disney Editions, 2020), 2.

geek fashion. While geek franchises are typically science-fiction and/or fantasy, the term geek fashion is used within the community to describe any clothing based on media with a visible fandom. Nevertheless, I have chosen the more general term of *fan fashion*. As fandom becomes more mainstream, people who do not generally identify as fans tend to participate in fannish acts of appropriation and re-writing, such as meme-making, fanfic, and cosplay. So, I find it more constructive to rely on popular usage of the word "fan" rather than the academic definition, which has become increasingly diffuse as media becomes a more pervasive part of people's everyday lives. The media industry capitalizes on the normalization of fandom and the desire for immersive engagement by offering *licensed fan fashion* collections that are usually created in collaboration with a fashion brand or retailer. Fans fill the gaps left by licensed merchandise by creating small, independent *unlicensed fan fashion* brands that work without licenses and therefore tend toward subtle designs that avoid copyright infringement.

PERIODIZATION & SCOPE

Given the significant social and industrial impact of contemporary new media, the post-Web 2.0 period serves as the historical and cultural context for this project. As Alice Marwick explains, Web 2.0 is more than a group of new technologies or websites, it is "a collection of ideals (transparency, participation, and openness)."[10] It not only affects the way people communicate with one another but how they view that communication. In particular, the pervasiveness of social media has brought together ever-growing media fan communities and greatly affected the way people today construct and present their identity. On the production side, new media technologies have increased the number of transmedia

[10] Alice E. Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, & Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 6.

story worlds and also changed the manner and shape of the distribution and exhibition of films and TV series. Overall, Web 2.0 is seen as a shift from one-way messaging to two-way communication between producers and consumers. This contemporary climate informs both my periodization and the context of my discussion of media engagement, clothing, and identity.

The practice of merchandising costume has been around since shortly after the beginnings of narrative film, developing alongside the entertainment industry and adapting to changing approaches to storytelling, merchandising, and marketing. The 1930s is often seen as the "golden age of cinema fashions" due to the explosion of star endorsements, fashion promotions, and merchandise tie-ins that occurred during that period and are detailed in Sarah Berry's *Screen Style: Fashion and Femininity in 1930s Hollywood*.[11] The practice of adapting film costumes into everyday fashions was largely catalyzed by former Bergdorf Goodman head designer Bernard Waldman's Modern Merchandising Bureau (MMB), which served as the liaison between film studios and clothing manufacturers. The studios also became directly involved in merchandising costume. In 1933, Warner Bros. created a department to focus on fashion tie-ins, and started licensing in-house designer Orry-Kelly's costumes as "Studio Styles" the following year.[12] Sometimes, designers adapted their own work into everyday fashion, like when Omar Kiam reproduced some of his *Folies Bergère* (1934) costumes for Saks Fifth Avenue in 1935.[13] By the mid-1930s, cinema fashions could be found at every major department store, and Butterick's "Starred Patterns"

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[11] Sarah Berry, *Screen Style: Fashion and Femininity in 1930s Hollywood* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xv.

[12] Berry, *Screen Style*, 17.

[13] Berry, *Screen Style*, 15.

were available in *Silver Screen, Movie Mirror,* and *Modern Screen* so even those affected by the Depression could make copies of fashionable costumes for themselves.[14]

As Rebecca Epstein points out, the accessibility of costume adaptations throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s coincided with a time when many white, middle-class women were transitioning out of exclusively domestic roles for personal or economic reasons.[15] Drawing on the style of stars like Marlene Dietrich, Joan Crawford, and Katharine Hepburn, these women found a way to negotiate "their fantasies of social respectability and material comfort along with their quests for self-determination, professional power, and sexual agency."[16] These stars, whose personal styles were usually created by in-house studio designers like Travis Banton and Adrian, served as role models for reconciling individuality and successful careers with traditional femininity and allure. We are in the midst of another boon in consumer desire for screen-inspired fashions that became apparent in the mid-2000s as a result of social media, gained popularity in the 2010s as media fandom became more mainstream, and is commonplace by the early 2020s. Unlike the cinema fashions of the first golden age, this second golden age responds to viewers' desires to emulate the values of the original text or its fictional characters rather than an attempt to capture "the aura" and glamour of the celebrity who wore the original costume.[17]

In this dissertation, I focus on the most current iteration of this practice—the one that aligns with the rise of social media as an integral part of everyday life, the increased

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[14] Berry, *Screen Style*, 21-22.

[15] Rebecca Epstein, "Sharon Stone in a Gap Turtleneck," in *Hollywood Goes Shopping*, eds. David Desser and Garth S. Jowett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 183.

[16] Epstein, "Sharon Stone in a Gap Turtleneck," 183.

[17] Charles Eckert, "Carole Lombard in Macy's Window," in *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*, eds. Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (New York: Routledge, 1990), 108.

interest in (and reliance on) transmedia storytelling and big media franchises, the mainstreaming of fandom and, with that, a widespread demand for film and television-related merchandise. This is also a time when the rise of streaming sites and illegal downloads bring fewer people to the theaters, and studios must increasingly rely on licensing as a significant source of revenue. James Castonguay describes this new relationship between the fashion and media industries in his chapter on "The Modern Entertainment Marketplace, 2000-Present" in *Costume, Makeup, and Hair*: "To 'traditional' and digital product placement, cross-promotion, and licensed merchandising and tie-ins have been added highly customized and targeted marketing (a.k.a. 'personalization'), branded videos, blogs, and online publications, and 'real-time marketing' that exploits social media and mobile apps to synchronize the consumption of entertainment content—including films—with shopping and purchasing."[18] This description provides a good sense of how the fan fashion industry post-2010 is a heightened, intensified, and "digitized" version of the long-running practice of fashion tie-ins. All of these factors form the context for a deeper discussion of the fan fashion industry from 2010-2020.

The rise of franchise films throughout the 2000s and 2010s brought a renewed focus on merchandising. In a 2004 *Los Angeles Times* article by Mimi Avins, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy designer Ngila Dickson recalls being "barraged by the merchandising people" for information, clothing swatches, sketches, and written descriptions.[19] Once the pervasiveness of digital technologies made transmedia marketing and storytelling the norm, retail partnerships and licensed merchandise became even more common. Contemporary

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[18] James Castonguay, "The Modern Entertainment Marketplace, 2000-Present," in *Costume, Makeup, and Hair*, ed. Adrienne L. McClean (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 150.

[19] Mimi Avins, "A thread of respect," *The Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 2004, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-nov-21-ca-costume21-story.html.

audiences expect that a story will not be contained to one medium but available as part of a transmedia narrative including film, television, video games, and licensed products, among other things. Hollywood was hit hard by online streaming and a lack of investment capital, and theater attendance dropped. Though revenue remained stable due to high ticket prices, the industry cannot continue raising ticket prices forever and must adapt to changing modes of production and consumption. Indeed, companies like Disney make more from their consumer product divisions than they do from theater ticket sales.[20] With the near-guarantee of additional revenue, licensed products and tie-ins gained prominence once again.

The industry's renewed focus on fashion tie-ins aligned with an overall increased interest in engaging with media through clothing. The once obscure practice of cosplay became common knowledge throughout the 2010s thanks to social media. More relevant to the discussion of fan fashion is the rise of Disneybounding, a practice that was already in existence among Disney parks fans but became much more widespread beginning in 2011 with Leslie Kay's blog, "DisneyBound." Excited about her upcoming trip to Walt Disney World and in search of a "creative outlet," Kay started putting together outfits based on her favorite Disney characters and posted them on her blog.[21] The posts were very successful, her following grew quickly, and three weeks later she was talking about her Disney-inspired outfits on national television.[22] Thanks to Kay's blog, the practice of creating outfits out of

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[20] Brent Lang, "The Reckoning: Why the Movie Business Is in Big Trouble," *Variety*, March 27, 2017, https://variety.com/2017/film/features/movie-business-changing-consumer-demand-studios-exhibitors-1202016699/.

[21] Leslie Kay quoted in Kelsey Borresen, "Disneybounding is the Dress-Up Trend Creative Fans are Obsessed With," *Huffington Post*, November 15, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/disneybounding-ideas-for-disney-lovers_n_59e5185ce4b02a215b325a30.

[22] Borresen, "Disneybounding is the Dress-Up Trend Creative Fans are Obsessed With."

everyday clothing reminiscent of Disney characters became known as Disneybounding. Iconic designs like Minnie Mouse's red and white polka dots are pretty easy for the average person to spot, but the more complicated Disneybounds are only recognizable to the "biggest Disney fanatics" who understand the shorthand and are extremely familiar with Disney imagery.[23] The practice grew in popularity over the early 2010s, mostly at Disney Parks, but some fans brought it into their everyday lives as well. People started using the same concept to create outfits inspired by other fictional characters besides Disney, a practice known by the more general terms of bounding or geekbounding. These are the conditions that laid the groundwork for the second "golden age of screen fashions."

Chronologies usually cannot be broken up cleanly into decades, and it is difficult to find true starting points for trends/eras. Nevertheless, Janie Bryant's 2011 *Mad Men* for Banana Republic collection can justifiably be used to mark the new era of fashion tie-ins. In 2012, costume designer Colleen Atwood debuted her first foray into fashion on the Home Shopping Network (HSN), adapting her medieval costumes from *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) into affordable sportswear pieces ranging from $39-169. The twelve-piece collection launched on May 30 to align with the film's release on June 1 and was part of a 24-hour HSN shopping event, which included products inspired by the film from HSN's beauty, jewelry, and fashion designers as well as behind-the-scenes interviews.

Product tie-ins are no longer separated from the pre-production process or treated as an afterthought. They are integrated into that process from the beginning. For example, costume designer Renee Ehrlich Kalfus designed costumes for *Annie* (2014) at the same

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[23] Leslie Kay quoted in Daniel Nasserian, "Interview: DisneyBound Explained by Leslie Kay," *Disney Geekery*, October 3, 2013, https://www.disneygeekery.com/2013/10/03/interview-disneybound-explained-leslie-kay/.

time she was designing a children's clothing line for Target based on the film costumes.[24] Her collection, discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, launched a month before the film was released, creating buzz for the upcoming movie and enabling children to wear the *Annie* clothes to the theater. Collaborations between costume designers and fashion retailers boost costume designers' visibility and popular interest in their work. Indeed, in these circumstances costume designers often become brand names and are granted the authorial status not offered to them in traditional film and television production labor hierarchies. Thus, I advocate for greater financial reward and credit granted to costume designers given their crucial creative contribution to these enhanced and lucrative forms of audience engagement with popular media products.

Unlike most scholarship on screen costume, this project is not concerned with the use of fashion *in* film nor does it examine the reciprocal influence of costume and fashion design *on* each other.[25] The clothing collections I consider are based *directly* on films and television series, and my focus is on the creative labor of the designers and the added value it brings to the clothing. Although my project focuses mainly on adaptations of film and television costumes and fandoms, many of the brands and designers I discuss create adaptations of video games, comic books, and literary characters as well. Therefore, my project does not consider fashion trends inspired by films or concepts of glamour and celebrity as they relate to costume and fashion. It is also not an aesthetic celebration of "good" or "beautiful" costume design but an analysis of how costumes function within and

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[24] Renee Ehrlich Kalfus, interview, February 25, 2015.

[25] See Adrienne Munich, ed. *Fashion in Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Michelle Tolini Finamore, *Hollywood Before Glamour: Fashion in American Silent Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Helen Warner, *Fashion on Television: Identity and Celebrity Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

without the screen text, serving as paratexts and constitutive parts of the transmedia story world.

This study is inherently limited by my focus on clothing that is officially related to a specific media source, since only certain texts are spun-off into fan fashion. Moreover, I limit my focus to contemporary English-language, widely available films and television series. As Jonathan Gray states, there is an advantage to analyzing well-known screen texts, since readers have a familiarity with the subject and can "fill in a fuller picture themselves."[26] My case studies focus on both film and television texts since the theories behind costume design are the same in both media forms, although many practical aspects of production differ between the two. In terms of the contemporary audience, changes in distribution and increased movement toward digital streaming, especially among younger audiences, means that the target demographic for fan fashion increasingly views film and television narratives in a similar way.

INFLUENCES & APPROACH

Cultural products, including costume adaptations, serve as "sites of struggle, contestation, and negotiation between a broad range of stakeholders."[27] For this reason, clothing is at the core of my project, serving as a starting point for discussions of who these stakeholders are and how the product is mediated through their varied influences. Although the industrial contexts of the contemporary media and fashion industries will always be present in my project to varying degrees, my central argument considers the fan fashion industry as its own complex system. Details of my specific methodologies and sources are

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[26] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 17.

[27] Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 5.

described at the beginning of each chapter. Nevertheless, there are overarching ideas and approaches that informed my research and writing processes. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of studying the overlap between film/television and clothing, I draw on approaches and scholarship from a variety of fields and sub-fields. Overall, my research method is qualitative, and involves discourse and rhetorical analyses of three main data sets: case studies, interviews, and participant-observation experiences. My goal is to temper theoretical ideas with on-the-ground research among practitioners and fans to understand the value of creative labor and how creating and selling fan fashion products affects their sense of self and the formation of community.

I explore various aspects of fan fashion through case studies—using specific garments and collections to demonstrate concepts, theories, and overarching trends within the industry. Following Jonathan Gray's work, I conceptualize this project as an "off-screen" study. In *Show Sold Separately*, Gray focuses on the "paratexts" that surround a specific screen text, such as advertising campaigns, DVD bonus materials, and licensed toys and games. Like my own project, Gray's work is hard to classify under existing areas of media studies. Thus, he suggests the term "off-screen" studies to describe his focus on the various paratextual materials related to screen texts. Gray argues that these materials often form a significant part (if not the only part) of people's experience of a film or television series and give the original media text meaning and value. Therefore, he recommends that media scholars analyze the "hype, synergy, promos, and peripherals" surrounding a screen text in the same way they would analyze the screen text itself.[28] In this regard, I am conducting an off-screen study by focusing on paratextual clothing "spun-off" from films and television

[28] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 4.

series and approaching the production and fan cultures surrounding costume adaptations as I would approach media production and fan cultures. This project explores "how storyworlds can develop and come to life in paratexts,"[29] specifically paratextual clothing. Through visual and discourse analyses of fan fashion merchandising and press, I consider how fan fashion is positioned to potential consumers, and how this positioning may influence the consumers' understanding and valuation of both the product and the original screen text.

Although scholars have written about the relationship between fans and clothing, few have reconceptualized this relationship in light of recent technological advancements, media convergence, and the pervasiveness of film and television culture in everyday social interactions.[30] As the 2010s have brought more popular attention to cosplay and fandom's relationship with fashion, scholarship on these topics has increased as well. Elizabeth Affuso points out how the growing visibility of fan fashion and beauty products has aligned with the mainstreaming of fandom and the appropriation of geek properties by popular culture. As with fan fashion, the consumer demand for fandom-inspired makeup "reflects a desire to integrate fan practices into everyday life" in personal and unobtrusive ways.[31] Despite increased interest in these topics, Affuso suggests that there is still much to be explored in the areas of cosplay and everyday cosplay. My dissertation adds to this growing field while providing a foundation for future inquiries into the meaning and value of fan fashion.

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[29] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 177.

[30] An anthology on this topic has recently been published and will be integrated into future versions of this dissertation: Elizabeth Affuso and Suzanne Scott, *Sartorial Fandom: Fashion, Beauty Culture, and Identity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023).

[31] Elizabeth Affuso, "Everyday Costume: Feminized Fandom, Retail, and Beauty Culture," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, eds. Suzanne Scott and Melissa A. Click (New York: Routledge, 2018), 184.

PRODUCTION CULTURES & MEDIA FRANCHISES

As Vicki Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell state in the introduction to their 2009 anthology, a production studies approach to media combines concepts and methods gleaned from the social sciences and humanities to explore the "lived realities" of individuals working in media production.[32] The effects of these "lived realities" on costume and fan fashion designers and their work is one of my main focuses. In addition to everyday practicalities, creative laborers work within industries that are undergoing major technological and economic transitions. They must therefore "shape and refashion their identities" as they navigate their careers.[33] I am concerned with two main aspects of the lived realities of creative labor—how it can be viewed as self-expression and how it necessarily involves identity negotiation, as these creative professionals are working within the confines of a corporate structure inherently concerned with branding (whether of screen texts or their affiliated clothing lines).

Caldwell conceived of film and TV production communities as "cultural expressions" that employ the same processes and practices used by other cultural groups "to gain and reinforce identity, to forge consensus and order, to perpetuate themselves and their interests, and to interpret the media *as* audience members."[34] I am similarly interested in how the production cultures of costume designers and fan fashion designers conceive of their creative labor, negotiate their professional and personal identities through work, and engage with the text through activities that mirror those traditionally associated with fans

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[32] Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell, *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.

[33] Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell, *Production Studies*, 4.

[34] John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.

(i.e. adapting an element of the screen text for a different context). I consider what constitutes their shared sets of values and practices, the value they add through their labor, and how this fosters a sense of community among all those involved. Like Caldwell, I am not as interested in the object itself as I am in creative labor, how the object is perceived by its creator and consumer, and the culture surrounding it.

Caldwell's "integrated cultural-industrial method of analysis" relies on four registers of data: textual analysis of trade and worker artifacts, interviews with film and television workers, ethnographic field observation of production spaces and professional gatherings, and economic/industrial analysis.[35] While I consider similar sources, my most significant data set is a compilation of interviews with costume designers, fan fashion designers, and other industry professionals. Interviews shed light on how costume and fan fashion designers see and articulate their costume adaptations as contributing to shared story worlds, as well as how these designers mediate their desire for creative self-expression with the limitations imposed on them by corporations and/or "higher-up" creative professionals. The ability to interview both professional costume designers and independent fan-creators puts me in a particularly privileged position to study the movement of clothing from screen texts to fan fashion and give voice to the designers who influence it along the way. These interviews do not stand on their own in my dissertation, nor are they taken at face value. Rather, I follow Caldwell's methodology by subjecting interviews and press quotes to discourse analysis aimed at revealing and thematizing the shared theories, practices, and feelings of the designers studied.

In "Gender Below-the-Line: Defining Feminist Production Studies," Miranda J. Banks explores the production culture of costume designers, emphasizing how they view

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[35] Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 4.

their own creative labor and contextualizing these findings within a specific cultural and industrial history. Banks argues that costume design is a "gendered profession" involving tasks often construed as women's work, which is why it is devalued in relation to male-dominated professions.[36] However, it is not only the gendered nature of the work that leads to costume designers being "marginalized on the set and in the press."[37] Indeed, the paradox of costume design is that successful costumes are meant to be invisible as such, which means the designer's hand is invisible as well. Thus, the subordination of screen costume to the demands of the narrative may be the most influential element in keeping designers marginalized and devalued.[38] Regardless of the cause, this tendency to overlook the creative labor of costume designers is one of the main motivators of my research and the reason I incorporate production studies frameworks and a focus on creative labor into my dissertation.

Costume designer and scholar Deborah Nadoolman Landis has emphasized the general academic neglect of costume design and sought to correct it in books that discuss costumes from the perspective of their designers.[39] Landis's monograph *Dressed: A Century of Hollywood Costume Design* lays out the trajectory of a costume from "script to screen,

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[36] Miranda J. Banks, "Gender Below-the-Line: Defining Feminist Production Studies," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studios of Media Industries*, eds. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2009), 90.

[37] Banks, "Gender Below-the-Line," 91.; This marginalization is, of course, not exclusive to costume designers nor only based on gender. Many below-the-line workers tend to be overlooked in the press and academia, though production studies scholars have sought to correct that imbalance. For example, see Vicki Mayer, *Below-the-Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[38] Adrienne Munich has also argued that it is the costume designers' success at creating costumes that appear "natural and transparent" that has led to their work being overlooked in *Fashion in Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 2.

[39] See Deborah Nadoolman Landis, *Screencraft: Costume Design* (Burlington: Focal, 2003), *Dressed: A Century of Hollywood Costume Design* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), and *FilmCraft: Costume Design* (Waltham: Focal, 2012).

and demystifies such loose concepts as so-called screen style and the mellifluous but mistaken moniker 'fashion in film.'"[40] It is singular in its ethnographic approach to documenting the history of costume design through her long-time participant-observation as well as interviews with other costume designers. My dissertation continues this work by drawing attention to costume designers' creative labor and the ways it is devalued. Although costumes are a key visual and narrative component of films and television series, academic theories of costume design are often limited and fail to recognize the designers or their creative labor. Stella Bruzzi's *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* is considered a foundational text on the theory of costume design, yet it does not reference any costume designers or discuss the production contexts that influenced their designs.[41] Other literature on screen costume primarily focuses on its relationship to Hollywood glamour, stardom and celebrity, and/or designer fashion and haute couture.[42] Although such scholarship offers necessary and valid contributions to the history of costume design, the continuing focus on costume's conjunction with fashion and star studies furthers the false notion that screen costume is only interesting if it is beautiful and glamorous. My project is closely aligned with Landis insofar as I view costume design as creative labor, costume as the manifestation of character, and costumes as a visual and constitutive part of the narrative rather than a distraction from it.

This conception of costume design as visual storytelling and as the "equivalent" of character is critical for understanding how producers and consumers engage with fan

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[40] Landis, *Dressed*, xvi.

[41] Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[42] See, for example, the various essays on screen costume and celebrities included in *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations and Analysis*, eds. Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson (New York: Routledge, 2001) and *Fashion Cultures Revisited* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

fashion and the identities enacted in everyday cosplay. The visual identities created by costume designers become stand-ins for the personal identities of fictional film and television characters. In this regard, costume adapters are not just designing clothes, they are interpreting and re-imagining characters and extending the screen text's narrative into the real world. Helen Warner explores the role of "cultural workers" in establishing the meanings of both screen texts and costumes, and "the representative trajectory of those meanings" beyond the screen text as images are internalized and repurposed by the viewer.[43] However, Warner argues that viewers associate fashionable screen costumes with the star qualities of the actor who wore them, whereas I argue that viewers who wear fan fashion are attempting to draw on the qualities of the fictional character and the story world associated with the original screen costume. After all, even *Sex and the City* (1998-2004, costume designer Patricia Field) fans think of themselves in terms of which character they are most like, not which actress. If costumes are the externalization of a characters' self-identity, then consumers who wear costume adaptations are, to some extent, assuming the identity of the fictional characters that the clothes represent. This deduction is what sets my work apart from other scholars who tend to view the negotiation of identity as occurring between the viewer and a celebrity rather than between the viewer and a fictional character.

Angela McRobbie's *Be Creative* provides a helpful model for contextualizing my primary research and understanding the wider cultural shifts that affect the media industry and, consequently, costume designers and fans. McRobbie describes how the "second wave" UK culture industry was marked by a neoliberal view of freelance creative labor as a "source of self-actualization, even freedom and independence,"[44] which is one of the key

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[43] Warner, *Fashion on Television*, 2.

[44] Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Malden: Polity Press, 2016), 19.

assumptions on which I base my argument. Although working as a freelancer in a creative field may seem like a way to escape corporate control and turn passion into personal profit, McRobbie describes how this sense of freedom is, in many ways, an illusion. The individualization promoted by neoliberal values disentangles people from organizational and social ties and forces them to set operational frameworks for themselves that would otherwise be set by corporate structures.[45] Although McRobbie's work focuses on critiquing the political and economic contexts that enabled this neoliberal model, my dissertation is more concerned with how they are reflected in the lived realities of professional and amateur creatives.

I believe the impact of digital technologies and social media on culture, industry, and everyday life cannot be underestimated and am thereby influenced by scholars like Denise Mann, Avi Santo, and Derek Johnson, whose utilize production studies methodologies to explore media franchising in the social media era. In "It's Not TV, It's Brand Management," Mann argues that the internet's influence on network television production "greatly altered the practices of collective 'authorship' even though industry discourses publically adhere to obsolete paradigms" focused on a single author like the showrunner.[46] Similarly, I argue throughout the next few chapters that costume designers and fans contribute to the story world and can be seen as authors in many ways. Nevertheless, the rhetoric surrounding their labor and the structure of licensing deals strips them of any legal or economic rights to their contributions.

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[45] McRobbie, *Be Creative*, 18.

[46] Denise Mann, "It's Not TV, It's Brand Management TV: The Collective Author(s) of the *Lost* Franchise," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studios of Media Industries*, eds. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2009), 99.

Mann considers "the negative cultural impact on production culture of having heightened demands placed on television writer-producers who, albeit well paid for their efforts, have been handed greater responsibility for steering massive, global, corporate TV empires."[47] The shift from creating films and television series to creating transmedia brands placed additional expectations on costume designers too. Whereas Mann notes that writer-producers are well-paid, below-the-line workers like costume designers are not, which is why it is especially important to call attention to the value of their labor. My project can be seen as answering Mann's call in *Wired TV: Laboring Over an Interactive Future* for new research to corroborate other scholars' accounts of "the insufficiencies of studio licensing divisions… by interviewing other marginalized production personnel, including low-paid transmedia producers and digital laborers,"[48] though the low-paid transmedia producers and digital laborers I focus on happen to be fans.

The contemporary transmedia tactics and synergistic strategies that catalyzed the second golden age of screen fashions are intensified versions of approaches Hollywood has employed throughout its history. Avi Santo makes this case by tracing the history of Lone Ranger licensing in *Selling the Silver Bullet*, providing useful context for scholars interested in licensing and media franchising. Santo calls attention to the complexity of licensing agreements and how they exemplify struggles over brand identity and legal authorship.[49] Although one of my overarching arguments is that IP owners ultimately benefit the most in the licensed and unlicensed fan fashion industries, I agree with Santo's assertion that

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[47] Mann, "It's Not TV," 99-100.

[48] Denise Mann, *Wired TV: Laboring Over an Interactive Future* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 7.

[49] Avi Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet: The Lone Ranger & Transmedia Brand Licensing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 11.

"efforts to paint licensors as villains and opportunists greatly oversimplify the work they do in popularizing IP" and, I would add, in providing fans with tangible connections to the story world.[50]

Media franchise workers and fans contributing to these story worlds must reconcile the desire for self-expression with the realities of collaborating within the limitations set by IP owners. Although the products themselves are owned by corporations and therefore branded, media franchise workers offer personalized contributions that mediate the corporately branded identity of the product and their own self-identity. Like the products of media franchises, costume adaptations are not simply replications of the "original" but are a result of "negotiated social and cultural contexts."[51] Although Derek Johnson is interested in how these negotiations are emblematic of larger power struggles within the culture industries, I am more interested in how they operate on an individual level as a micro-struggle between industrially-branded and expressively-personalized identities. Johnson's work aims to problematize the idea that franchise production is mediocre or that it is simply a way for the media industries to make more money from an existing story world rather than creating a new, original idea. Instead, he provides a complex picture of media franchising, shifting the usual economic focus on franchising to the "human agency and social meaning" at work within such an industrial structure.[52] Similarly, my goal is to understand the human agency and social meaning of the individuals who design costumes

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[50] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*, 8.

[51] Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 3; Similarly, Patrick Vonderau has argued against the view of prop-making as mere replication in his exploration of the creative labor of film and television prop-makers in "How Global is Hollywood?: Division of Labor from a Prop-Making Perspective," in *Production Studies*, 23-36.

[52] Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 2.

and fan fashion while remaining critical of the exploitative structures within which they are forced to operate.

FAN IDENTITY & PLAY

Unlike the ethnographic field observation utilized by Caldwell, my method of participant observation is more closely aligned with Henry Jenkins' "aca-fandom," which is a method of incorporating one's own fandom into their scholarly work.[53] Not only do I draw on my experiences as a costume designer but also a cosplayer, designer and consumer of fan fashion, and member of various online fan communities. The "aca-fan" approach requires scholars to negotiate their identities as academics and fans, remaining "in a constant movement between these two levels of understanding which are not necessarily in conflict but are also not necessarily in perfect alignment."[54] While it can be challenging to maintain analytical distance from one's own activities, I find this approach to be especially well-suited for fan studies work, as people are more likely to open up to fellow community members. Moreover, there are certain aspects of communities that only insiders are aware of and/or understand. My identity as a costume designer and fan enables me to speak from a position of experience throughout this dissertation and provides insight that would be difficult to gain with an outsider's perspective.

As the creative labor of audiences has become more visible (thanks to the internet) and increasingly acknowledged and integrated into industrial business models, conceptions of fan activity have shifted from viewing it as threatening to considering it useful. Jenkins'

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[53] Jenkins is explicit in the introduction to *Textual Poachers* about how his position as a media fan influences his academic work. Additionally, Jenkins' blog is titled "Confessions of an Aca-Fan." See: Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Henry Jenkins, "Confession of an Aca-Fan," *The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, accessible via henryjenkins.org.

[54] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 5.

Convergence Culture describes a world where social media and technology have significantly impacted the way people conceive of storytelling, branding, and their personal identities. Jenkins explores the relationship between media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence, focusing on "the work—and play—spectators perform in the new media system,"[55] which is where my project intersects. As media becomes a more pervasive part of our everyday lives, it becomes an increasingly influential factor in how we negotiate our identity and relate to others, because it becomes a frame through which we view reality. The transmedia storytelling and marketing tactics employed by media conglomerates take advantage of the way media and digital technologies have become such an important part of everyday life, spreading the narrative across different platforms and products with the knowledge that audiences will consume as much as they can.[56]

Audiences "create meaning from activities that articulate a connection between their own creativity and mainstream media" through media play.[57] Media play may involve splicing multiple screen texts together to create a mash-up video, but play can also involve turning an oversized Yoda t-shirt into a dress or channeling Lisbeth Salander by wearing a leather jacket from H&M's *The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo* collection. I am interested in what such play through clothing provides for designers and fans alike. Like the creation of "digital cosplay" outfits as described by Booth, fan fashion offers ways "for the fan to express self-affect… and to discuss aspects of her own identity as tied to that of a media product."[58]

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[55] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2.

[56] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 98.

[57] Paul Booth, *Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 15.

[58] Booth, *Playing Fans*, 163.

My work follows Booth's in the sense that we both examine "the link between the media industries that create commoditized media products for profit in a commercial venue and fans who interpret and affectively appreciate those media products."[59] Although I borrow from both Jenkins' and Booth's views of fan activity, my project intervenes in the field of fan studies through its specific focus on costume and clothing as the object of viewer engagement. My project puts clothing in the forefront, emphasizes the idea of an active viewer who personalizes screen texts, and explores how this personalization is enacted through everyday cosplay.

Brigid Cherry's *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles* focuses on the adjacent area of fan handicrafting, which often involves creating wearable pieces inspired by media but is not necessarily everyday cosplay or fan fashion. As with the cosplay continuum, some handicrafted items are meant to be replicas of props or costume accessories seen onscreen while others are inspired by characters, stories, or objects. Following an aca-fan approach, Cherry employs a "participant-observation method… informed and underpinned by autoethnography" to explore the fan handicrafting community on the crafting social media site, Ravelry.[60] Like Cherry, I believe one of the most important characteristics of fans' creative labor is its "affective nature," which can best be understood by someone who shares that same affective attachment. Furthermore, participating in online fan communities made it easier to prioritize, sort, and analyze data on consumer reactions to licensed and unlicensed fan fashion collections from comments sections on press articles, social media,

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[59] Booth, *Playing Fans*, 6.

[60] Brigid Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles: Handicrafting as Fan Art* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 8.

and ecommerce product pages.[61]

So-called "feminine forms of fan production," like fanfic, handicrafting, and fashion, have not been legitimized by the culture industries to the same extent as male fan production.[62] Academia has, for the most part, overlooked the relationship between fandom and fashion until more recently, perhaps because fashion and beauty are not as "straightforwardly related to fan culture."[63] Nevertheless, Cherry argues that handicrafters form a "community in their own right, related to and sharing members with, but also separate from, other areas of fan culture."[64] The same can be said for fan fashion, which forms a unique subculture and community within fan culture. Like handicrafting, fan fashion offers the opportunity to "perform the fan identity beyond the confines of the fan community, extending into everyday life."[65] It is the everydayness of the activity that separates fan fashion from cosplay and makes it worthy of study in its own right. Cherry's focus on how social media has enabled the formation of tight-knit online fan communities, creative labor as a mode of self-expression, and gender align with my own goals to call attention to so-called feminized labor and the accompanying personal and social benefits.

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[61] Josh Stenger pulls from a similar data set of online fan activity in his exploration of the 2003 eBay auction of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) memorabilia, which he uses as an entry point to explore the complex gender and consumerist politics surrounding the show and its fan community. Drawing on Henry Jenkins' work and incorporating textual analysis of the TV series, Stenger offers a comprehensive picture of the auction as a convergence of fan practices, production, consumption, marketing, and e-commerce. Specifically, he focuses on how the sale of memorabilia problematizes ideas of authorship and ownership by legally transferring a "piece of the show" to its fans. "The Clothes Make the Fan: Fashion and Online Fandom when Buffy the Vampire Slayer Goes to eBay," *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 26-44.

[62] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 34.

[63] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 14.

[64] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 35.

[65] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 27.

In our focus on gendered fan production and aca-fan approach, Cherry's work and my own can be seen as being in conversation with Suzanne Scott's *Fake Geek Girls*. Scott attempts to "map the growing industrial and fan-cultural efforts to marginalize female fans" between 2006 and 2017.[66] Thus, Scott focuses on the challenges that accompany the mainstreaming of fandom and how they negatively affect female fans, whereas I focus on how the mainstreaming of fandom has, in some ways, aided female fans by enabling them to form their own online communities outside of male-dominated spaces. Scott is "more interested in considering how various systems and stakeholders work to shape and validate an androcentric cultural conception of the 'media fan' than in ethnographically exploring the lived experience of creative production of individual fans or particular fan communities of practice."[67] In this sense, Scott's book serves as a complement to my dissertation by laying out the context in which the lived experiences I focus on occur. Her work brings nuance to the discussion of convergence culture and the ways that fandom has been commodified by the media industry.

While the majority of *Fake Geek Girls* discusses female fans' marginalization, the final chapter explores "the ways in which geek girls *are* hailed within the convergence culture industry."[68] Interestingly enough, that chapter focuses on fan fashion and cosplay, thereby supporting my argument that these provide spaces for female fans within otherwise male-dominated fandoms. Nevertheless, Scott points out how the licensed merchandise geared toward female fans still tends to exemplify an idealized consumer, an issue that I argue in Chapter 3 is addressed by the unlicensed fan fashion industry. Regardless, Scott's

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[66] Suzanne Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 4.

[67] Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*, 6-7.

[68] Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*, 15.

view of fan fashion aligns with my own—that it contains "the promise of embodiment and identification."[69] Therefore, it aligns well with convergence era strategies of capitalizing on fans' affective attachments and providing immersive engagement experiences through promotional events and licensed merchandise.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

Throughout the following chapters, I aim to demonstrate how IP owners profit off the creative labor of costume designers and fans, who infuse significant meaning and added value into costume adaptations and fan fashion but receive mostly symbolic compensation for their efforts. Even when costume designers create fashion under their own names or fans adapt costumes without licenses, the products are inherently tied to the source of their cultural capital—the original media text. So, their promotion and sale ultimately benefit the original IP owners. These issues are explored through costume and fashion designers' experiences working on fan fashion, which reveals a personal investment in the products due to the nature of creative labor. My generous use of quotes from costume designers and fashion designers was a conscious decision made in an effort to amplify their (mostly female) voices and highlight the value of their creative labor, which is so often overlooked and undervalued. I also weave in fan-consumers' perspectives and how fan fashion makes them feel, which is an important part of understanding the value designers bring and the meaning they infuse into their work.

Chapter 1 focuses on the place of costume designers in the contemporary licensed fan fashion industry. I begin by discussing the gender bias faced by costume designers and how this has historically affected their ability to secure proper remuneration and respect for their work. Changes to media production and marketing have placed the expectation of additional

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[69] Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*, 199.

labor on costume designers without additional compensation. Because they are work-for-hire employees, they have no legal rights to their designs or any additional profits generated by them. Yet the reality is that costume designers are increasingly being recognized as creators and storytellers in their own right, largely due to the rise of streaming and social media. Their newfound cultural capital brings status and authenticity to licensed fan fashion. I contend that although the current industry standard has been normalized, it is unethical. If creative labor is a mode of self-expression or identity performance, what does it mean when the product of that labor is seized and appropriated by a corporation? I argue that costume designers deserve to be credited and compensated when their work is used outside of the original film or television series. Furthermore, they should be given the option to consult or collaborate on licensed merchandise and properly recompensed for the additional labor. The chapter concludes with a discussion of what is being done to effect change, including social media campaigns amplifying the Costume Designers Guild's long-running push for proper credit and compensation and people higher up in the production hierarchy using their power to involve costume designers in collaborations. Many costume designers have also taken to social media to build their personal brands, capitalizing on the caché earned through their association with certain IP to secure fashion design work and brand partnerships under their own names. In this sense, they turn the tables on the corporations who own and profit from the fruits of their creative labor.

Chapter 2 delves deeper into the meaning and value of licensed fan fashion collections designed by the costume designers and sold through fashion retailers through the case study of the Renee Ehrlich Kalfus's *Annie* for Target collection. By following Kalfus's experience, I examine how these types of collaborations come to be, what the designer's role is, how they approach fashion and costume design differently, and what sort of credit and/or compensation they receive. I analyze the collection as a paratext,

considering how it operates as an extension of the Annie brand and offers viewers an entry point into the *Annie* story world. I analyze how the promotional materials surrounding the *Annie* for Target collection encouraged consumers to conflate the costumes with the fashion. Because the collaboration offered the chance to be "dressed" by the same person who dressed the characters, the collection was connected to the story world based on the presence of a shared "author" or "creator." The case of the *Annie* for Target collection is unique, since it was based on a heritage brand and designed for children. Thus, the film and the fashion collection's marketing capitalized on the expected nostalgic connection parents would have with *Annie* and framed them as an experience to share with their kids. I close the chapter with an analysis of a fan-made review video of *Annie* and the Target collection, revealing how consumers engaged with the clothes as both costume and fashion. I suggest that the imaginative play and everyday cosplay enabled by collaborations like the *Annie* for Target collection have the potential to be therapeutic. In this sense, fan fashion holds great value for fans and IP owners as an immersive and enjoyable way of engaging with media.

Chapter 3 moves outside the licensed fan fashion industry into the parallel fan-run unlicensed industry. I look at the designers within this industry as a production culture, acknowledging what makes each brand unique while also calling attention to the shared values and practices that form fan fashion culture and the surrounding community. I consider the personal nature of their creative labor and the pros and cons involved in blurring the boundaries between one's personal and professional selves. Unlicensed fan fashion designers approach design as translation, creating subtle and versatile designs that often reference deep cuts and supporting characters. Furthermore, they aim to be inclusive in their sizing and serve a diverse range of fans while supporting other fan creators. Fandom is often considered a gift culture, and monetizing fan production can be seen at odds with that. However, the unlicensed fan fashion industry has found a way to monetize their work

while keeping profits within the fan community and maintaining the ethos of a gift culture. They avoid paying out to IP owners through interpretive adaptations of costumes, creative marketing tactics that avoid character names and titles, and flying-under-the-radar as small businesses that do not pose a potential threat to licensed merchandise profits. In fact, I argue that the unlicensed industry supports the licensed industry in many ways, such as helping to maintain a demand for fan fashion, providing insight into what consumers want, and providing advertising for their IP by sharing their fandom and designs.

Chapter 4 looks closely at what motivates fans to share their creative labor, even though they are aware that licensors and licensees receive an unfair portion of the profits. I do so by focusing on the online t-shirt design contests held by geek apparel and goods brand WeLoveFine in the early 2010s. I argue that companies like WeLoveFine position themselves as fans in an attempt to seem more authentic and encourage fans to perform free or low-cost labor in support of the brand. They offload risk and keep overhead low by crowdsourcing designs from fans rather than paying full-time employees. Through gamification, companies like WeLoveFine make work fun and elide the exploitative aspects of these contests. Nevertheless, the labor performed does not seem equivalent to the prizes awarded, which are mostly symbolic. Fans justify this practice by contextualizing it within fandom's gift culture and the contemporary gig economy. Though these contests may be pleasurable for fans, they are ultimately detrimental to professional designers who become unnecessary if the companies can get the same labor for a fraction of the cost from fans.

The Conclusion chapter brings together all of the issues discussed in previous chapters through the case study of the Her Universe Fashion Show. The show is an annual "geek couture" design contest co-hosted by licensed fan fashion brand Her Universe and Hot Topic. The winners of the Her Universe contest, many of whom work in media production and/or create unlicensed fan fashion, design a licensed fan fashion collection for

Hot Topic. As with the previous chapters, I focus on the designer's role—the amount of time and labor they put in, their personal investment in their work, and the mostly symbolic compensation they receive. As with costume designers and fans who participate in WeLoveFine contests, their enjoyment of creative labor obfuscates the exploitative aspects and is used to justify the imbalanced profit structure of the fan fashion industry.

In addition to adding to the scholarly conversations mentioned previously, this dissertation is meant to educate and empower fans and creative laborers. By examining the cultural and industrial shifts that resulted from the rise of social media, my goal is to support the advocacy efforts of professional costume designers and fan-creators whose labor is being exploited by the media industry. The Costume Designers Guild has worked hard to educate its members and the general public and can benefit from scholarly research corroborating their claims of gender discrimination and underpayment. Additionally, the contributions of the fan fashion community and how their labor benefits the media industry illuminates how and why they deserve better recognition and remuneration. Academics must continue to bridge the gap between scholarship and the media industry by tempering theoretical concerns with practical considerations and inviting media workers and fans to contribute to our research.

CHAPTER 1: WHOSE DESIGN IS IT ANYWAY?

On May 4, 2015 at 10:00pm, Beyoncé arrived at the Met Gala wearing a Givenchy Haute Couture gown designed by Riccardo Tisci. As is standard with any red carpet event, social media immediately erupted with a range of reactions to Beyoncé's barely-there beaded gown. Some Twitter users found the look inappropriate or even trashy, while others applauded the singer for showing off her curves. Just as comparisons had been made earlier in the evening between Rihanna's sumptuous yellow Guo Pei cape and Big Bird,[1] it was only a matter of time before the Twitter-verse found a pop culture reference for Beyoncé. Luckily her comparison was a bit more flattering, with social media "celebrities" like The Fat Jewish posting side-by-side photos of Beyoncé and Imani Izzi from the 1988 film *Coming to America*. Over the next couple of days, online news outlets picked up the story of Beyoncé "channeling" the character at the Gala. Actor Vanessa Bell Calloway posted on Instagram expressing excitement over the comparison. Although the Givenchy gown resembles the film costume, this coverage is problematic as it presents the wearers of the gowns as their authors rather than attributing the work to their designers. One story refers to Beyoncé's interesting interpretation of the Gala's theme (in the form of her dress) while simultaneously attributing the design of the dress to someone else. The same article gives Beyoncé the prerogative in styling her hair and choosing her accessories, though other articles clearly state that she used a professional hair stylist. Her hair style was also subjected to pop culture comparisons, as it was referred to in at least two stories as an "*I Dream of Jeannie*-like ponytail."[2]

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[1] Lisa Respers France, "Met Gala 2015: The dresses that were doing the most," *CNN*, May 5, 2015, https://www.cnn.com/2015/05/05/entertainment/met-gala-2015-beyonce-rihanna-memes-feat/index.html.

[2] Brittany Talarico, "Met Gala 2015: Beyoncé Does Her Sexy Thing in Completely Sheer Gown, Everyone Bows Down," *People: StyleWatch*, May 4, 2015.

While every article mentioned that the gown was Givenchy, only a few of them attributed the design to Riccardo Tisci, creative director for Givenchy Haute Couture. Furthermore, none of the articles or social media posts mentioned the person responsible for the *Coming to America* gown: costume designer Deborah Nadoolman Landis, who received an Academy Award nomination for her work on the film and is a vocal advocate for ensuring that costume designers receive proper credit for their work. The names of fashion designers are usually put second to the brand, but the names of costume designers are often left out entirely. The coverage of Beyoncé's Met Gala gown is indicative of how costume designers are erased from discussions of costumes. Instead, their work is attributed to fictional characters or the actors that embody them. This erasure of the costume designer in popular discourse reveals the necessity for more in-depth study of the role and status of the contemporary costume designer. The lack of credit and compensation costume designers receive is not limited to press and social media conversations, but is a pervasive issue within the media industry.

It is clear from the Beyoncé comparison that costumes make a lasting impression on audience's memories and become shorthand for the characters who wore them. However, despite costume's impact and staying power, the designers and costumers who create them labor in relative obscurity. It is only more recently, with the rise of social media and streaming sites, that the general public has taken an interest in costume and gotten to know some costume designers by name. Still, even with this small amount of celebrity, costume designers struggle to receive proper credit and compensation for their work. While the various issues designers face will be discussed in this chapter, my main focus is on licensed fashions based on film and television and the place of costume designers within this growing industry. As mentioned in the Introduction chapter, media-inspired merchandise has been around nearly as long as narrative film, in various forms and with varying amounts

of influence from the original costume designers. The 1930s are often seen as the height of this practice—a time when consumer demand was high for "cinema fashions" from Hollywood costume designers who were celebrities in their own right and often had ties to the fashion world as well. The emerging trends throughout the 2010s point to the beginnings of a second golden age. While this trend has helped shed light on costume designers and their work, it is also one more area in which their labor can be exploited.

Licensed fan fashion collections are a consequence of the growing visibility of fan communities and the media industries' recognition that even mainstream audiences want to engage with film and television beyond the viewing experience. There is a plethora of websites and social media accounts dedicated to tracing characters' costumes in popular TV shows and helping audience members "get the look."[3] IP owners capitalize on this growing desire to connect through clothing by licensing costumes and characters to retail fashion brands. Streaming companies and digital technologies have significantly changed the media landscape, resulting in "new, high-quality media franchises that draw huge fan bases hungry for licensed products."[4] Licensed merchandise is not just an ancillary profit stream for many IP owners, but their main source of revenue and the reason their characters exist. Companies like Disney make more from their consumer product divisions than they do from theater ticket sales.[5] While these new sources of revenue may relieve concerns about maintaining subscribers and "drive profits for creators and talent who are concerned about

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[3] Some examples include: ShopYourTV.com, WornOnTV.net, and the now defunct Spylight app as well as Instagram accounts like @everyoutfitonsatc and @sopranosstyle.

[4] Kirsty Birkett-Stubbs, "In Depth: Licensing and Retail in North America," *License Global*, April 26, 2018.

[5] Lang, "The Reckoning."

seeing a back end,"[6] only IP owners and the people at the top see profits from licensed merchandise. Costume designers are typically not credited or compensated for licensed merchandise, even Halloween costumes or readymade cosplays that are replicas of their original costume design, because they are work-for-hire employees with no legal ownership of their work. The percentage of IP that gets merchandised is relatively small compared to the hours of content designed and produced, so most costume designers are directly affected by these issues during their career. Nevertheless, creative laborers deserve the right to benefit from their work, and thus the current industry model is unethical and warrants further examination.

This chapter discusses the challenges film and television costume designers face in the contemporary media industry, the value they can bring to licensing deals, and their attempts to gain fair and comprehensive compensation. My research revealed the prevalence of contradictory feelings of helplessness and hopefulness. While many costume designers and advocates have noticed the increased focus on costume designers and are happy that there are conversations happening about pay equity and licensing deals, there is still a general feeling that changes are happening too slowly or not at all. Notably, the overwhelming majority of costume designers are women. In fact, the Costume Designers Guild (CDG) is over 87% women. The stereotype of costume design as "women's work" impacts their ability to secure higher salaries and more rights due to gender bias. I argue that although the current industry standard is normalized, it is unethical, since costume designers are creators with a personal investment in their work who deserve to profit from its use. I detail the benefits of involving designers in collaborations and propose the adoption of a royalty payment model based on similar models for above-the-line creatives,

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[6] Dina Appleton and Daniel Yankelevits, *Hollywood Dealmaking* (New York: Allworth Press, 2018), 24.

who share in the profits when a licensee pays the licensor (typically the studio or network) for access to the IP.

To explore these questions of ethics and authorship, I looked to scholarship on creative labor, intellectual property, media licensing and franchising, and fashion copyright. This provided useful context for analyzing my interviews with Linda Kearns (head of Matchbook Company's division devoted to costume designers), Maggie Platner (VP of Licensing and Ecommerce for Showtime and CBS), Lisa Granshaw (geek fashion journalist), and Jeff Trexler (head of the Fashion Law Institute), which provided background on how licensing works and what is currently being done to protect costume designers and ensure fair treatment. To better understand costume designers' perspectives on licensed fashions, I spoke with costume designers Renee Ehrlich Kalfus, Salvador Perez, Dan Lawson, and Janie Bryant. Lawson's costume designs for *The Good Wife* (2009-2016) and *The Good Fight* (2017-2022) secured him fashion design work and a brand ambassadorship with Lafayette 184 New York. Kalfus and Bryant have both collaborated with retailers on licensed fashion collections based on their costume designs, while Perez served as president of the Costume Designer's Guild from 2013-2022 and is an outspoken advocate for issues like pay equity and proper credit. Gathering these different perspectives from people fulfilling a variety of roles inside and outside the industry provides a fuller picture of the issues facing costume designers and how they are being addressed.

My goal is to bring attention to the complexity of the costume designer's role and question the normalization of their status as below-the-line work-for-hire employees, thereby adding to the limited scholarship on costume designers within the field of production studies. As Erin Hill says, "women's work must be viewed from the perspective of both the system—the structures that produced gendered understandings of labor—and the individual—the experiences of workers themselves and how they negotiated, resisted,

and otherwise co-created their professional identities."[7] Hill's goal is to start correcting that omission and chronicle the work of women in the film industry, particularly those in clerical positions. Hill does not want to see women described in film history merely as victims of gender politics but instead "reveals their agency" by shedding light on "the types of work women *could* and *did* do in the wake of sex segregation."[8] With the same motivation, I believe it is necessary to call attention to the costume designers specifically because their gendered labor would otherwise be overlooked. Furthermore, studies of licensed merchandise tend to focus on the objects and divorce them from the production context that inspired them, which erases the creative labor of those involved in the production of media content and ancillary merchandise.[9] However, it is impossible to properly analyze or fully understand something without considering the context from which it came. Case studies anchor the discussion in which I aim to illuminate the issues costume designers face, make a case for why they deserve credit and compensation for licensed merchandise, and discuss the steps being taken to affect change.

INVISIBILITY & INEQUITY

Before looking more specifically at licensed merchandise, it is important to have a sense of the big picture and how the lack of credit or compensation for licensed merchandise is just one of several related issues that costume designers face. As is true for many contemporary media workers, costume designers are overworked, undervalued, and underpaid. The contemporary media landscape requires designers perform additional tasks

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[7] Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 10.

[8] Hill, *Never Done*, 6.

[9] A notable exception is Derek Johnson's *Media Franchising*, which considers the experiences of creative laborers and their contributions to transmedia franchises.

in increasingly stressful production environments, while their labor and designs are used to help promote films and TV series through marketing and licensed merchandise. Unfortunately, the methods of crediting and compensating costume designers have not evolved alongside their increasingly dynamic role. The issue is compounded by gender discrimination and is most clearly seen in their fight for pay equity. If they are not being properly compensated for the basic tasks they complete, it is even more difficult to argue for compensation for additional labor. Particularly in the area of licensed merchandise, designers' work is exploited, because they are work-for-hire employees with no legal claim over the fruits of their labor or the additional profits their designs generate. Furthermore, corporate structure is complex. The people making licensing deals are far removed from the realities of production and do not understand what costume designers do or the value they can bring to licensed merchandise, especially fan fashion. Raising awareness about the role costume designers play and the difficulties they face is the first step toward affecting change.

GENDER DISCRIMINATION & THE CDG

A history of gender discrimination underpins and exacerbates most issues that costume designers face. Costume designers struggle to be taken seriously, have their voices heard, and achieve pay equity because they are mostly women in the male-dominated field of media production. Costume designer and former CDG president Deborah Nadoolman Landis believes it is not possible to "overstate the entrenched gender discrimination that afflicts the field," and has dedicated her career to raising awareness of costume designers' value and advocating for proper credit and compensation.[10] Sexism has been rampant throughout the history of Hollywood, but it was mostly reported on as isolated incidents or

[10] Deborah Nadoolman Landis quoted in Todd Longwell, "Costume Designers Fight Gender Bias and Pay Inequality," *Variety*, August 21, 2018, https://variety.com/2018/artisans/news/the-handmaids-tale-1202911250-1202911250/.

off-hand remarks until the mid-2010s when people began to acknowledge how pervasive and systemic the problem is in the media industry. Especially after the 2013 Sony leak revealed emails regarding the pay gap between Jennifer Lawrence and her male co-stars, many actresses and women directors became vocal advocates against sexism in Hollywood. While these high-profile advocates bring much-needed attention to the issue of sexism, the focus is nearly always on pay for lead actresses or the lack of female directors. The messaging leaves out the other crew positions where women are paid less, discriminated against, or not being hired at all. Even with big-name actors like Patricia Arquette and Meryl Streep speaking out on gender discrimination in Hollywood and the "cultural zeitgeist" being especially concerned with providing opportunities for marginalized people, Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film Martha Lauzen has not seen much change.[11] *The Washington Post*'s Sally Kohn points out that the gender pay gap is present in all sectors and makes explicit the hard truth—if women like Lawrence who have star power and a team of people working for them cannot secure proper compensation, what chance does everyone else have?[12]

The costume department has historically been a woman's domain. Although many famous costume designers of the Classical Hollywood era were men—Orry-Kelly, Adrian, Travis Banton—the other roles in the department were filled mostly by immigrant women.[13] Erin Hill challenges the notion that women were not a significant part of the film industry

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[11] Martha Lauzen quoted in Brent Lang, "Women Comprise 7% of Directors on Top 250 Films," *Variety*, October 27, 2015, https://variety.com/2015/film/news/women-hollywood-inequality-directors-behind-the-camera-1201626691/.

[12] Sally Kohn, "Stop denying the gender pay gap exists. Even Jennifer Lawrence was shortchanged." *The Washington Post*, December 17, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/12/17/stop-denying-the-gender-pay-gap-exists-even-jennifer-lawrence-was-shortchanged/.

[13] Hill, *Never Done*, 4.

throughout history, arguing instead that their labor merely was not recorded because it was "'women's work,' which was—by definition—insignificant, tedious, low status, and noncreative."[14] As women started gaining entry into higher level positions, the spaces that were most available to them were those that had already been marked as "feminine." Since fashion is viewed as a "pink-and-lavender discipline" because of its association with women and gay men, the costume department was one of the places women could find a higher level job.[15]

The devaluation of so-called women's work is not just a historical issue but is still pervasive in the film industry of the 2010s and into the 2020s. In Miranda Banks' 2009 production study of costume designers, she found that costume design is a "gendered profession" and therefore devalued in relation to male-dominated professions.[16] Costume designers are regularly told that anyone who shops or has fashion sense could do their job, which completely undermines the significant contributions costume designers make to the story and aesthetic. As Landis points out, the "original function of costume" is storytelling.[17] Costume designers do not just dress actors, they create characters through clothing so "before an actor speaks, his wardrobe has already spoken for him."[18] Unfortunately, this role "has never been recognized or recompensed adequately,"[19] despite the work Landis and

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[14] Hill, *Never Done*, 5.

[15] Susan Scafidi, "Fiat Fashion Law! The Launch of a Label—And a New Branch of Law" in *Navigating Fashion Law: Leading Lawyers on Exploring the Trends, Cases, and Strategies of Fashion Law* (Boston: Aspatore, 2012), 10

[16] Banks, "Gender Below-the-Line," 90.

[17] Landis, *Screencraft: Costume Design*, 8.

[18] Landis, *Screencraft: Costume Design*, 9.

[19] Deborah Nadoolman Landis, "President's Letter," *The Costume Designer* (Summer 2006): 6.

other past presidents of the CDG have done to raise the profile of designers and call attention to the issue of pay inequity, which is where this gender bias is most clearly seen.

The push for proper remuneration is nothing new. Following the breakup of the studio system and the shift to contract labor, the Costume Designers Guild was formed in 1953 by founding members Marjorie Best, Renie Conley, Elois Jenssen, Sheila O'Brien, Leah Rhodes, Howard Shoup, William Travilla, and Michael Woulfe for the purpose of "advanc[ing] the economic, professional, and cultural interests of its members."[20] In 1958, after fifteen months of talks with the Labor Committee of the Association of Motion Picture Producers, the CDG was unable to reach a collective bargaining agreement. So, they sent their legal team to negotiate directly with the major studios to secure a minimum wage and assurances regarding work conditions.[21] But it was not until 1977 that the CDG signed its "first-ever minimum wage scale pact." Not only was this the first time they "attained a collective bargaining pact," it was also the first time the Guild was covered under IATSE's agreement with Universal and Paramount. The three-and-a-half-year agreement included an immediate wage increase and guarantees for "credits and other fringe benefits, such as extra pay for location work, pension, health and welfare and other provisions."[22]

Founding member Sheila O'Brien was key in organizing costume designers and negotiating on behalf of the Guild from its inception, through five terms as CDG president, until her death in 1983. She became the CDG's first paid business agent in 1963 and was the first female business agent in IATSE. O'Brien was quoted in *The Hollywood Reporter* (*THR*) in 1979 stating her belief that "the people who create the wealth—workers—should

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[20] "Scrapbook: Our Founding Members," *The Costume Designer* (Summer 2015): 34.

[21] "Costume Designers Guild Takes New Pact Tack," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 18, 1958, 5.

[22] Charles A. Barrett, "Costumers sign new 3 ½-yr. pact," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 25, 1977, 1-2.

have a fair share in it."[23] However, it was not an easy road for the CDG's attempts at bargaining, as it took eight years for them to secure their first contract. O'Brien attributed this to the fact that "Designers weren't very militant" and lacked power within the Hollywood hierarchy, which led them to finally merge with IATSE after several years of operating independently.[24] The Costume Designers Guild Local 892 covers film and television costume designers west of the Mississippi River and is tied to the IATSE West Coast Locals through a collective bargaining agreement. This means that any changes to the Basic Agreement, like receiving a percentage of profits and raising their weekly scale, require the agreement of the twelve other Hollywood Locals.[25] While there are benefits, including pensions and medial insurance, to being covered under IATSE's Basic Agreement, which is renegotiated every three years, the CDG's obligations to the IATSE West Coast Locals are yet another hurdle on the path to proper compensation.

Over the years, the CDG worked to raise the profile of costume designers in hopes of increasing their bargaining power, largely through exhibits of costume design sketches and costumes. They also collaborated with fashion organizations in Los Angeles on fashion shows and other events. Nevertheless, misperceptions about the role of costume designers and their importance in the storytelling process continued, exacerbated by improper credits and the rhetoric used by directors presenting themselves as the singular "author" of films. For example, the CDG filed a complaint regarding a screen credit for *The Hand* (1981), which incorrectly credited Ernest Misko as "Costume Designer" rather than "Costume

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[23] Ron Ridenour, "Costume guild head O'Brien only woman b.a. in IA at 77," *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 19, 1979, 8.

[24] Ridenour, "Costume guild head O'Brien only woman b.a. in IA at 77," 8.

[25] The most recent IATSE Basic Agreement was negotiated in 2021 and is available on their website: https://www.basicagreement.iatse.net/.

Supervisor." An advertisement was published in *THR* by the production company, Lizard's Tail productions, correcting the mistake and offering their "apologies to the Guild and to Mr. Misko for the inadvertent error."[26] The CDG also pushed back in 1992 when director Tim Burton claimed design credit for *Batman Returns* (1992), hurting the chances of the actual costume designers Bob Ringwood and Mary Vogt to earn an Oscar nomination.[27] Just over a week after *THR* reported on the CDG's concerns, the Guild published an advertisement in the magazine quoting actor and director Lamont Johnson: "Directors and costume designers are collaborators on the illusion, on building character, and on the environment of the piece."[28] Although the ad was published without context, it is clearly a response to Burton's claims and the CDG's way of reminding people that costume designers are creative collaborators whose work is key to characterization and storytelling. Despite the CDG's work, costume designers' feelings of being misunderstood, overlooked, and undervalued continued throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s.

While *THR* reported on the CDG's negotiations and attempts to secure wage guarantees throughout the years, the gender-based pay inequity between costume designers and production designers was not explicitly mentioned in the magazine until 2002. In the article, journalist Gina McIntyre states that costume designers "make roughly one-third of what other below-the-line professionals make," although the issue is not explored any further since McIntyre's focus is on the place of high fashion in costume design. The article features quotes from costume designers stressing that although there are times when fashion is used as costume, they still design all the characters' looks and remain focused on

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[26] Advertisement, *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 23, 1982, 22.

[27] Robert Osborne, "Brouhaha brewing over 'Bat' design credits," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 30, 1992, 9.

[28] Advertisement, *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 8, 1992, 9.

storytelling above all else. Overall, the article serves to reinforce the difference between fashion and costume while educating readers about the important role costume designers play, even when the costumes are shopped rather than built. McIntyre points out how Landis, who was CDG president at the time, was "particularly vocal in defending the work of the members of her guild, many of whom have inspire fashion trends but seldom are given credit for originating those looks."[29] It is clear that the misconceptions about what costume designers were still contributing to their invisibility and the CDG's lack of power, even after fifty years of fighting. This lack of respect most clearly manifested in the pay gap between costume designers and their counterparts, production designers.

In 2003, Landis gave a presentation on pay inequity and gender bias against costume designers when she represented the CDG during contract negotiations between the AMPTP and IATSE.[30] She recalls that "it became depressingly clear that the value of the costume designer was defined by a lack of respect from both the AMPTP and our own IATSE."[31] Despite Landis's speech and the outcry of other CDG members, costume designers were told that their "status as 'non-mandatory hire' was 'settled' precedent."[32] Although members of Motion Picture Costumers Local 705 are protected by the mandatory staffing clause within the Basic Agreement, members of the CDG are not. This reinforces the misconception that costume designers are unnecessary and expendable. Productions are not required to hire or credit costume designers, and many smaller films do not or will incorrectly credit designers as "Wardrobe" without realizing the difference. This lack of understanding, stubborn

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[29] Gina McIntyre, "Style Factor," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 7, 2002, 19.

[30] Deborah Nadoolman Landis, "Hollywood Costume: A Journey to Curation" in *Performance Costume: New Perspectives and Methods* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 173-174.

[31] Landis, "Hollywood Costume: A Journey to Curation," 174.

[32] Landis, "Hollywood Costume: A Journey to Curation," 174.

resistance to change, and the weak argument of "that's how it's always been" have left costume designers continually fighting for another twenty years since Landis's speech. Most costume designers are aware that pay inequity is merely a symptom of a deeper, more pervasive bias in favor of male-dominated professions within the media industry.

More recently, Todd Longwell's 2018 *Variety* article brought the massive pay inequity between costume designers and production designers further into the public eye, noting that the base rate for members of the Art Directors Guild (27% women) is over $1000 more than that for designers in the Costume Designers Guild (83% women). Longwell emphasized what costume designers have long known—that this is a "result of gender bias against a guild that is predominantly female" and, by extension, the perception of costume design as women's work.[33] Salvador Perez admitted that he has been paid more than his female counterparts, which is "proof that it's a gender thing."[34] Costume designer Michele Clapton claimed that poor pay for below-the-line workers is even worse in the UK. It was only once she became a "celebrity" through her work on *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) that she was able to negotiate better wages for herself and her staff.[35] Advocates outside the CDG have suggested the pay equity issue be dealt with at the union level, but costume designers know the CDG is not strong enough to make an impact through collective action like striking. If costume designers went on strike, their jobs would be filled by others

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[33] Longwell, "Costume Designers Fight Gender Bias and Pay Inequality."

[34] Frances Solá-Santiago, "Costume Designers Are Stars On Social Media. So Why Aren't They Being Paid That Way?," *Refinery29*, September 18, 2021, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2021/09/10676505/costume-designers-pay-inequality-social-media.

[35] Whitney Friedlander, "'Game of Thrones' Costume Designer Says Wage Inequality for Below-the-Line Workers Worse in the UK," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 8, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lifestyle/style/game-thrones-costume-designer-wage-inequality-below-line-workers-worse-uk-1141220/.

willing to work. The truth is "there's only so much one can do in an industry where 'you'll never work in this town again' is still a powerful threat."[36]

The issue of gender discrimination is compounded for BIPOC designers, who must wade through multiple layers of bias and push even harder for recognition. Ruth E. Carter was the first Black woman to receive an Oscar nomination for Best Costume Design for *Malcolm X* (1993) and became the first Black woman to win the award in 2019 for *Black Panther*. Mayes C Rubeo became the first Latine costume designer to be nominated for an Oscar in 2020 for *Jojo Rabbit* (2019). In a 2018 article in *The Guardian*, costume designer Gersha Phillips discussed the difficulty of breaking into what feels like a "secret society," and how being Black in a white-dominated industry can make you feel "like you're invisible… that you don't matter."[37] In the media industry, it is all about who you know. *The Guardian* writer Dream McClinton admits that Black costume designers who find success are often those with family or friends in the industry. When the industry is overwhelmingly run by white men, it can be hard for Black women and other women of color to get a foot in the door.

Some advocates for change believe an effective way of combating discrimination is an inclusion rider stipulating that a certain number of women, people of color, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ people must be hired on to a production. Others, like *In Living Color* (1990-1994) costume designer Michele Cole, believe that change starts with successful costume designers doing more to diversify their departments and recruit and train BIPOC costume designers and costumers.[38] Most Black costume designers get their first break on a

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[36] Longwell, "Costume Designers Fight Gender Bias and Pay Inequality."

[37] Dream McClinton, "'You can't dismiss us any more': the rise of black female costume designers," *The Guardian*, March 2, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/mar/02/ruth-e-carter-.

[38] McClinton, "'You can't dismiss us any more.'"

Black production.[39] For those who "make it," the work can still be fraught with tension and discomfort. Ruth E. Carter admitted that being a trailblazer has its disadvantages, as it can be lonely to "sit in a room of people who don't look like you."[40] *Girlfriends* (2000-2008) costume designer Stacy Beverly says it is "a triple-edged sword… Being Black, being a woman, and having so much responsibility for what's being portrayed on screen—yet being the lowest paid of all the department heads on a production—is pretty frustrating, to say the least."[41] These feelings of isolation are experienced by BIPOC costume designers on top of the existing alienation they suffer due to gender bias in the industry, which impacts costume designers' everyday experiences and makes it difficult to secure proper remuneration for their work. When Landis asked to be compensated for the merchandising of her *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) costumes, she says: "There was laughter on the other end… just like all other women artists… we've been left behind."[42]

"WORK FASTER FOR LESS MONEY"

While gender discrimination has plagued the costume department for much of Hollywood history, the rise of digital technologies throughout the 2000s has brought new challenges, including accelerating the rate at which content is produced. This sped-up work pace is part of a larger shift to a production model John Caldwell aptly calls "stress aesthetics," in which underfunded production conditions are rationalized as a "historical

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[39] McClinton, "'You can't dismiss us any more.'"

[40] McClinton, "'You can't dismiss us any more.'"

[41] Shelby Ivey Christie, "A History of Black Costume Design in Film and Television," *Coveteur.com*, February 22, 2019, https://coveteur.com/2019/02/22/history-black-costume-design-film-television/.

[42] Landis quoted in Whitney Friedlander, "Costume Designers Often Left Out of Merchandising Fashion Around Big Budget Films, TV Shows," *Variety*, December 14, 2016, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/costume-designers-left-merchandising-fashion-around-big-budget-films-tv-shows-955890/.

norm" that promotes creativity and innovation.[43] However, Caldwell shows that these conditions are not a longstanding part of media production but tied to the rise of digital technologies. As a result, undue stress has been put on costume designers and other media workers who are expected to "work faster for less money."[44] Costume designers are only paid for their time on set, despite the fact that most of their work is traditionally done during pre-production. In some situations, designers can earn less as the department head than costume supervisors and costumers who are paid hourly and receive overtime.[45] The rise of these "industrial trends toward contract labor, outsourcing, downsizing, and runaway production" have increased the "stress and anxiety" of production workers, who must now deal with mental trauma on top of the physical trauma they suffer from working labor-intensive production jobs.[46]

Costume designers feel pressure to work even harder to keep up with rising audience expectations and technological advancements.[47] Although pre-production time has shortened, the amount of work required to design costumes for a film or television series has not decreased. While this clearly stresses designers, it is presented as the norm, so they have come to expect it and feel grateful when they get a more reasonable amount of prep time. Costume designer Sonu Mishra had four to six months of prep time when she first

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[43] John T. Caldwell, "Stress Aesthetics," in *Behind the Screen: Inside European Production Cultures*, eds. Petr Szczepanik and Patrick Vonderau (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 103.

[44] Banks, "Gender Below-the-Line," 93.

[45] Longwell, "Costume Designers Fight Gender Bias and Pay Inequality."

[46] Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 185.

[47] Salvador Perez, phone interview, August 31, 2018.

started working, but now "If you get two months, you're really lucky."[48] The creative solutions costume designers find to make up for this time deficit require them to go above and beyond their job descriptions, performing free labor and receiving no overtime payment. Notably, these conditions are not unique to low/no-budget or independent films, as "blockbuster films regularly exceed their budgets and run deficits."[49] In a *Variety* article, costume designer Jennifer Johnson recalls averaging eighteen hours a day on her last film but only being paid for twelve.[50] While these anecdotes could be read as exaggeration for the sake of perpetuating the type of heroic myths Caldwell discusses, they unfortunately reflect reality.[51] Caldwell's "inverse credibility law" refers to his observation that the higher up someone is in the Hollywood hierarchy, the more likely they are to fall back on marketing rhetoric rather than being candid.[52] Although I argue later in the chapter that costume designers have achieved a certain amount of celebrity thanks to social media, they are still below-the-line workers who have little to gain by obscuring the realities of their job. The CDG has historically focused on advocating through education, operating on the belief that if the industry, press, and public understand what costume designers do, then their "status, prestige and salaries will be secure."[53]

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[48] Michel Ghanem, "Why it's Time for Television Costume Designers to Receive Public Recognition for their Work," *Fashionista*, September 15, 2017, https://fashionista.com/2017/09/television-costume-design-awards-recognition.

[49] Caldwell, "Stress Aesthetics," 92.

[50] Longwell, "Costume Designers Fight Gender Bias and Pay Inequality."

[51] Caldwell refers to "against-all-odds" trade stories that highlight the resilience of workers overcoming humble origins and working with limited resources in *Production Culture*, 40-41.

[52] Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 3.

[53] Landis, "President's Letter," *The Costume Designer* (Fall 2005): 9.

It is not merely media production being sped up, the speed at which consumer products are being created and churned out is increasing as well in the digital era. Maura Regan, Executive Vice President for LIMA, noted that the fast fashion mindset has permeated other product categories as well. The traditional product development cycle of 12-18 months is now a "luxury," and brands need to get products out quicker to "stay relevant to the consumer."[54] With the near-guarantee of additional revenue, licensed products and tie-ins are no longer treated as an afterthought. If people love a film or series and want related products, licensors and licensees need to be ready to get them in stores as soon as possible. So, they are incorporated into the production process from the beginning, often times being released ahead of the film or series premiere to help promote it. Even though licensed fashion collections require additional labor, some costume designers want to be involved, as it gives them a chance to maintain control over their work and express their ideas in a different way. However, if they want to be a part of something like that, they have to be willing to take on two jobs at once. This is not unlike the "collapsed workflows" that Caldwell lists as another main consequence of digital technology. The traditional sequence of production and post-production has collapsed, as digital allows some activities to occur simultaneously.[55] Because this ultimately shortens the time it takes to complete the film, its ramifications extend beyond post-production workers to everyone involved in the production process.

Contrary to other scholarship that celebrates the transmedia era and convergence culture, Denise Mann considers the "negative cultural impact" of these new expectations on

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[54] Maura Regan quoted in Birkett-Stubbs, "In Depth: Licensing and Retail in North America."

[55] Caldwell, "Stress Aesthetics," 94.

production culture.[56] Writing in the mid to late 2000s, Mann was already pointing to how transmedia franchises becoming the norm affected the role of media workers, specifically TV writer-producers whose roles expanded from showrunner to "brand manager," and how this new production model requires a revised understanding of authorship.[57] The contemporary media industry requires media workers be skilled multitaskers and perform tasks outside their job descriptions, which Caldwell refers to as "expanded workscope." At the simplest level, this affects media workers on low/no budget films who, like myself, are expected to fulfill multiple roles while only being paid for one. I once served as the costume designer, prop master, and script supervisor on a film, but was only credited as costume designer and script supervisor and only paid for costume design (which was half what the production designer was paid). However, independent media workers and film students are not the only ones dealing with expanded workscope. Even costume designers on big budget projects with full crews are expected to go above and beyond their traditional job description as the lines between content and promotion blur.

The age of convergence and explosion of content in the digital age has changed the way studios and networks approach marketing in many ways. A significant change has been the evolution from monetary sponsorships to creative partnerships between consumer brands and media content. In an overcrowded marketplace, the need to differentiate and reach consumers shifted branding from something solely under the purview of marketing and advertising professionals to an integral part of the production process, which Caldwell argues "altered the very look and sound of contemporary television."[58] Jenkins' analysis of

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[56] Mann, "It's Not TV," 99.

[57] Mann, "It's Not TV," 99.

[58] Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 246.

American Idol (2002-) reveals the "strong interest in integrating entertainment and marketing" that began in the early 2000s, with networks focusing less on the content itself and more on "brand extension, the idea that successful brands are built by exploiting multiple contacts between brand and consumer."[59] These changes at the level of corporate strategy trickle down to affect media workers and the realities of their job. Mann notes how "networks have continued to exploit the thin line between content and promotions" since the Writer's Guild strike in 2007-2008.[60] For costume designers, the "broader increase in retail partnerships and merchandising agreements"[61] throughout the 2010s has created an expectation that they perform additional labor that is not included in their contracts, like consulting on licensed merchandise and collaborating on promotions with brand partners. While costume designers are typically pleased to have a say in how their work is used beyond the film or series, their contracts only cover their role as costume designer.

The people at the top want it both ways—they want work-for-hire so they can control the IP, but they want the loyalty and all-encompassing contracts of the studio era. ABC asked *Scandal* (2012-2018) costume designer Lyn Paolo to fly to New York and curate store windows at Saks Fifth Avenue to promote the season three premiere. They assumed it would not take much of her time and offered to cover her air fare. However, Paolo assured them it would take quite a bit of her time and involved her booking agent Linda Kearns. Because promoting the show was not part of Paolo's contract, she and Kearns requested a fee for the additional labor.[62] ABC's initial withholding of payment reveals a lack of understanding and

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[59] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 106, 69.

[60] Denise Mann, "Introduction: When Television and New Media Work Worlds Collide" in *Wired TV: Laboring Over an Interactive Future* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 4.

[61] Castonguay, "The Modern Entertainment Marketplace, 2000-Present," 164.

[62] Linda Kearns, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

appreciation of creative labor, especially as it relates to costume and fashion. People think it is as simple as choosing an outfit, not realizing the thought that goes into every detail. In addition to having to fight for compensation, Paolo's contribution was downplayed in the press. *The Hollywood Reporter*'s Stephanie Chan credits Paolo with curating the window installation, but says the windows "celebrate Kerry Washington's signature style," which not only conflates the actress with her character's costume but implies that she is responsible for her onscreen look.[63] This critique is not meant as an indictment of Chan but a demonstration of how pervasive the misconceptions of costume design are—stretching even to those working for industry publications.

Although the behind-the-scenes reality is that she had to fight for compensation for her additional labor, Paolo romanticizes the experience in her statement, saying she was "thrilled to have had the opportunity to work with the Saks team in bringing the *Scandal* characters to life in their windows… to play a part in the creation of the iconic Saks windows is a dream come true, and a truly wonderful creative experience on every level."[64] Of course, Paolo needs to stay positive and professional to maintain a good relationship with Saks and ABC, so speaking out is not really an option. Nevertheless, her statement unwittingly reinforces ABC's initial thought that this was not work by framing it as a privilege and enjoyable experience. McRobbie points out how this ideology of "passionate work" and finding pleasure in work "can be construed as a willingness to work all hours for very little pay,"[65] thereby justifying "wage stagnation and regression."[66] Costume designers and other

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[63] Stephanie Chan, "Collaboration Nation: Saks Fifth Avenue Partners With 'Scandal,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 25, 2013.

[64] Chan, "Collaboration Nation."

[65] McRobbie, *Be Creative*, 110.

[66] McRobbie, *Be Creative*, 88.

creatives often say they love their jobs so much they would do them for free, but people do not actually want to work for free, nor should they.

Nevertheless, media workers are often expected to work for free to network and maintain relationships or gain the experience required for a paying gig. Andrew Ross argues that working for free has been normalized largely because "it is not experienced as exploitation."[67] Rather, internships are often seen as exciting opportunities that get you one step closer to your dream job. Employers understand and exploit this fact. While this culture of unpaid internships and free labor from students/aspirants is not unique to the media industry, it makes an already closed-off industry completely inaccessible for some. Breaking into the industry feels nearly impossible for aspiring costume designers from a low-income background, according to Sharen Davis, who had to work two jobs at the beginning of her career to make enough money to live. Ruth E. Carter agrees that for many people, "working for free is not an option."[68] Nevertheless, that is the expectation for the majority of those attempting to break into film and television production. The industry is flooded with young hopefuls willing to work for little to no money to gain experience, making it more challenging for experienced costume designers to compete for jobs and still ask for the rate they deserve. This forms the context for the "symbolic payroll system" that has accompanied the normalization of stress aesthetics.[69] However, costume designers are not even guaranteed symbolic pay in the form of credit.

In July 2010, Mattel released a collection of *Mad Men* Barbie dolls to promote the series' fourth season. The dolls were based on four main characters from the series: Don

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[67] Andrew Ross, "In Search of the Lost Paycheck" in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, ed. Trebor Scholz (New York: Routledge, 2013), 17.

[68] McClinton, "'You can't dismiss us any more.'"

[69] Caldwell, "Stress Aesthetics," 99.

Draper, Betty Draper, Roger Sterling, and Joan Holloway. Although they were not the first film or television-inspired Barbie dolls, they were the first licensed dolls for the Barbie Fashion Model Collection, which features higher-end collectible Barbies made of silkstone and dressed in "couture quality fashions and accessories."[70] Press articles announcing the Barbie line refer to *Mad Men* costume designer Janie Bryant as a collaborator on the dolls and/or say that the dolls had her approval, but Mattel's official press release does not mention Bryant at all. Despite promoting the dolls as being "stylized [sic] in iconic costumes from the series," all design credit is given to Barbie designer Robert Best. In the promotional video "When Mad Men Met Barbie" covering the launch party at LACMA, Best refers to meetings with *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner and Bryant to discuss the dolls. Bryant calls it a "collaboration" and recalls showing Best costumes and discussing which would be the best and most iconic for the dolls. While Bryant clearly put time into providing feedback on the Barbies and her costumes are replicated almost exactly, she received no official credit for her work. Her only compensation was "two sets of Barbie dolls."[71]

WORK-FOR-HIRE & INDUSTRY IGNORANCE

In the 1930s when the demand for "screen fashions" hit its initial peak, Hollywood costume designers were under contract with the studios, which meant they earned a steady salary, enjoyed job security, and were considered an investment by the studios. As the studio system collapsed and film style shifted, labor practices shifted as well; media production became a freelance job and work-for-hire contracts became the norm.[72] Work-

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[70] Mattel press release via Pam Kueber, "Mad Men Barbie line: Don, Betty, Roger & Joan," *Retro Renovation*, March 10, 2010, https://retrorenovation.com/2010/03/10/mad-men-barbie-line-don-betty-roger-joan/.

[71] Janie Bryant, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[72] Interestingly, theatre costume designers maintain ownership of their designs according to the Local 829 contract. Furthermore, theatre costume designers receive royalties from the production. See: Michael

for-hire status denies creatives the right to ownership of their work, while the legal "authors" are the executives or corporations who often had no hand in creation. Matt Stahl gives a brief overview of the evolution of work-for-hire, which emerged after the Civil War alongside the development of the entertainment industries and commercialized intellectual property.[73] The US Copyright Act of 1909 cemented work-for-hire and marked an end to the rights creatives had over the products of their labor. Status for freelancers remained even more ill-defined until the 1976 Copyright Act categorized them as work-for-hire as well, following lobbying efforts from the film and publishing industries. Some creative workers tried to fight for authorship rights again the early 1980s, but the bills failed to pass and work-for-hire was "further naturalized and normalized through another Congressional stamp of approval."[74] While the ability to collectively bargain can offset certain issues by gaining "quasi-proprietary" rights, that only happens for a select few and does not protect non-union workers. Derek Johnson notes how the necessity of collaborating with independent partners in the era of franchise production has made IP ownership "increasingly central to corporate strategy," ensuring they can protect their content in addition to profiting from its licensing.[75] Studios and networks will position an executive as the "author" of a production, using "creative depersonalization… to promote the corporation

Paulson and David Gelles, "'Hamilton' Inc.: The Path to a Billion-Dollar Broadway Show," *New York Times*, June 8, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/12/theater/hamilton-inc-the-path-to-a-billion-dollar-show.html.

[73] Matt Stahl, "Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds: Copyright, Collective Bargaining, and Working Conditions in Media Making" in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 55.

[74] Stahl, "Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds," 57.

[75] Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 5.

as creator" and thus guaranteeing ownership of the IP.[76] They deny credit so they do not have to compensate. If they are the creators, then it justifies them reaping all the rewards.

Thus, IP owners have no investment in collaborating with costume designers and are not required to pay them anything beyond the daily rate for time on-set. Fashion collections and costume-inspired merchandise where costume designers are consulted, credited, and/or compensated are still the exception rather than the rule. Even now that the precedent of receiving credit has been set by designers like Trish Summerville and Renee Ehrlich Kalfus, costume designers are still struggling for proper compensation.[77] Stahl calls out the tendency for scholars to write about work-for-hire and "the line" as a given rather than looking at it critically or "question[ing] the legitimacy" of such practices and distinctions between above-the-line and below-the-line workers.[78] I have found the same in my reading as well as in my interviews and interactions with costume designers, media workers, and people in related industries. Although most costume designers accept their legal status as a necessary evil, they still feel frustrated that they are forced to relinquish the rights to all of their work every time they sign on to a project. Kalfus, who is a member of Local 829, referred to the standard hiring contract as "a horrible paper" and joked that she always wishes she could accidentally misplace it: "I can't bear signing this thing, but that's how it is, that's the deal."[79]

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[76] Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 241.

[77] Summerville's name was on the hangtag for her collaboration with H&M based on her designs for *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. Kalfus received credit on the hangtag for the *Annie* for Target collection, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

[78] Stahl, "Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds," 65.

[79] Renee Ehrlich Kalfus, interview, August 21, 2018.

Men's fashion brand John Varvatos released a *Game of Thrones* capsule collection in March 2019 with no involvement or mention of the series' costume designer Michele Clapton. HBO's VP of licensing and retail Jeff Peters claimed that Clapton was busy on another project. When *Variety*'s Zoe Hewitt reached out to Clapton for comment, her response was measured:

> I'm very excited to see that there is such strong consumer interest in these types of film, television and fashion collaborations. I know that the increase in these partnerships will continue to highlight the creativity and hard work which costume designers put into their craft, and that is very gratifying. I strongly believe that participation by costume designers and recognition of their roles in these projects is an important topic, and I'm encouraged that our industry is engaged in this incredibly vital discussion.[80]

While Clapton's diplomatic response does not explicitly reveal frustration over being left out of the John Varvatos collection, the subtext of her comment is clear. Consumers want licensed fashion collections. These collections are made possible due to the creative labor of costume designers and the impact of their designs. So, the industry needs to recognize that and start reevaluating their approach to developing licensed fashions. The quote demonstrates the previously mentioned tension between helplessness and hopefulness that many contemporary costume designers feel. They are happy that the topic is up for discussion, but there is still a long way to go before proper recognition, credit, and compensation are achieved.

Further complicating the issue of design ownership is the lack of fashion copyright laws in the United States. Although society may view fashion as frivolous, the law considers clothing too utilitarian to receive legal protection. Clothes are considered "useful items" and

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[80] Michele Clapton quoted in Zoe Hewitt, "Costume Designers Fashion a Plan to Fight for Pay Parity in Upcoming Contract Talks," *Variety*, July 19, 2019.

therefore cannot be protected by copyright laws.[81] This makes it even more challenging for costume designers to argue that they deserve compensation when their designs are used for licensed merchandise. Opponents of fashion copyright legislation argue that "fashion is essentially repetitive and therefore devoid of creativity worthy of legal protection."[82] They believe that the lack of fashion copyright stimulates creativity, since designers must stay ahead of the companies that knock them off, "creating a virtuous cycle of innovation that benefits the consumer."[83] I would argue the opposite—that IP protection stimulates more creativity as designers have to come up with new and original designs rather than copying what has already been done. Those in favor of design piracy legislation see it as a "legal recognition of the creativity and artistic value inherent in original fashion designs," just as a change in the credit and compensation methods for costume designers would be an appropriate way to recognize their contributions to film and television.[84] Associate Director of the Fashion Law Institute Jeff Trexler believes it is "vital" for costume designers to educate themselves on the basics of intellectual property, especially copyright law, so they can use it to their advantage: "there's some long games that you can play in this that frankly I'm just not seeing people do, because they don't understand what they can do."[85]

Of course, money is partially why costume designers are not consulted or compensated for licensed merchandise based on their designs. As Avi Santo writes,

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[81] Guillermo C. Jimenez, "A Survey of Fashion Law: Key Issues and Trends" in *Fashion Law* (New York: Fairchild Books, 2014), 16.

[82] Guillermo C. Jimenez, Joseph Murphy, and Julie Zerbo, "Design Piracy Legislation: Should the United States Protect Fashion Design?" in *Fashion Law* (New York: Fairchild Books, 2014), 71.

[83] Jimenez, Murphy, and Zerbo, "Design Piracy Legislation," 69.

[84] Jimenez, Murphy, and Zerbo, "Design Piracy Legislation," 74.

[85] Jeff Trexler, interview, September 30, 2019.

"licensors are in the business of cultivating investment among stakeholders in a property's attributes and value."[86] For them, it is all about the IP and how it can bring in revenue. If IP owners do not have to split their profits with a work-for-hire employee, why would they? Bryant's agents attempted to add a clause in her contract about having rights to additional profits made from her designs, but she received an emphatic "no" and the condescending implication that a costume designer should not worry their "pretty little head" about the economic side of things. Meanwhile, IP owners are "making millions and millions of dollars on your costume that you designed,"[87] but they neglect to see the added value of involving costume designers in licensing deals. Unfortunately, Kearns explains that many executives still see bringing in the costume designer as "an added cost as opposed to an added benefit."[88]

Despite the frustration shared by Bryant and other costume designers I have spoken with, they accept that the IP owner's bottom line is making a profit. They understand that companies just want to make money. However, so do costume designers. Thus far, they have been trying to convince IP owners that there are more profits to be had for everyone if they involve costume designers. As Kearns puts it, "it's gotta be a win-win for everyone."[89] Either way, when it comes to fashion collections, it is easier and less risky to license IP to a fashion retailer with experience in fan fashion, like Hot Topic.[90] Fashion is different than visual media. The studio and network licensing departments do not understand the fashion

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[86] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*, 12.

[87] Janie Bryant, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[88] Linda Kearns, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[89] Linda Kearns, interview, September 5, 2019.

[90] Linda Kearns, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

industry, how its production schedule works, and how to make the most from these licensed collections. According to Bryant, "producers say we're not in the fashion business, we're in the film business."[91] They know there is a market for fan fashion but are not experts in that area, so they offload the risk by licensing out to fashion brands.

Furthermore, there are "so many different things just have to be aligned" for a licensed fashion collection to come together, like rights, audience interest, advertising, timing, which person is handling the deal, etc. Showtime, for example, co-produces some content with studios and does not own the licensing rights to all of their shows.[92] So, even if they wanted to involve a costume designer in a licensing deal, their co-producer might not. IP owners are likely to concentrate their resources on sci-fi/fantasy transmedia movie franchises and established television series that are guaranteed to sell licensed merchandise, rather than focusing on smaller one-off projects that may or may not create a dedicated fan base of consumers. Kalfus believed that her costume designs for *Hidden Figures* (2016) would resonate with audiences, but the studio was not convinced the film would be successful enough to warrant a licensed fashion collection. The film ended up being a big success, and several articles were written about Kalfus's work on the film, including some offering suggestions on how to recreate the look yourself.[93]

In 2018, Kearns noted an increased interest in the marketability of a show's look but acknowledged that there were still "so many competing agendas when you're trying to do these deals." Kearns may find a retailer interested in collaborating on a licensed collection, but the network might not know who their advertisers are yet, so they cannot risk creating a

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[91] Janie Bryant, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[92] Maggie Platner, phone interview, September 6, 2018.

[93] Lillian Fallon, "On-Screen Style: How to Channel the 'Hidden Figures' 1950s Style Today," *Verily*, January 27, 2017, https://verilymag.com/2017/01/hidden-figures-outfit-inspiration-for-modern-women.

collection with someone who may be in competition with an advertiser. By the time the ad buy is finalized, it is often too late to design produce a collection.[94] For a film, the marketing department might not start working on it until after the film is complete, meaning there would be no time to strike a deal with a fashion brand and produce a collection in time for the film's release. Furthermore, when a film or television production is being developed, it can be difficult to gauge audience interest in ancillary merchandise. Consumer demand may only become apparent after the production has become successful at the box office or on streaming sites, and it is much too late to design accompanying product lines. *Empire* (2015-2020) costume designer Paolo Nieddu believes it is about getting the collections out as quickly as possible without having to take the time to consult with designers or pay for their input. Nieddu was nominated for two Emmy's for *Empire* and showed interest in working on a fashion collection, but was never asked to collaborate on any fashions or events inspired by the show.[95] Platner explains that the most challenging part of getting costume designers involved in licensing deals is convincing everyone why it is worth taking the extra time to involve an additional person.[96] Licensing deals are complicated and already involve so many parties, adding another person into the mix could further slow things down.

Costume designers are not improperly credited and compensated for their additional labor or left out of licensing deals solely due to greedy corporations looking to keep all the profits for themselves. Licensors and media executives do not understand the day-to-day details of production, what the job really entails, or the added value costume designers can

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[94] Linda Kearns, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[95] Paolo Nieddu quoted in Whitney Friedlander, "Costume Designers Often Left Out."

[96] Maggie Platner, phone interview, September 6, 2018.

bring to licensing deals. Many people see costume designers as glorified shoppers who merely rent pre-made costumes or purchase clothes that go straight off the rack onto the screen. However, as I have continually reinforced throughout this section, a talented costume designer tells stories through clothing and will make the costumes seem like such a natural extension of the character that their labor is erased. Landis explains how "this anonymity is a casualty of our profession," since it is a costume designer's job to be "invisible."[97] As costume designer Arianne Phillips states, "It doesn't occur to them that a person actually created these costumes."[98] This paradox of invisibility, compounded with the tendency to overlook so-called women's work, leaves costume designers feeling ignored, undervalued, and "marginalized on set and in the press."[99]

Not only do IP owners and licensing executives not understand costume design, they have no personal connection with crew members that would enable them to learn more about their work. Costume designers are aware that the people in charge of making licensing deals are far removed from the actual production, so the decision to leave them out is not personal. As Perez explained in our interview, "It's some branding, marketing person that works in a corporate office that has no idea who we are."[100] The ignorance among industry professionals is clear in vice president of television brand marketing for 20th Century Fox Peter Leeb's explanation for why costume designers are typically not consulted for licensed merchandise: "There are certain times where the show and the producers and

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[97] Landis, "President's Letter," *The Costume Designer* (Fall 2006): 7.

[98] Arianne Phillips quoted in Zoe Hewitt, "Costume Designers Fashion a Plan to Fight for Pay Parity in Upcoming Contract Talks," *Variety*, July 19, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/artisans/production/costume-designers-guild-pay-parity-contract-talks-1203272455/.

[99] Banks, "Gender Below-the-Line," 91.

[100] Salvador Perez, phone interview, August 31, 2018.

the stylists are involved… Ultimately, the vision of all these characters is created by our producer and our creators who are involved in everything."[101] Not only does Leeb show a gross misunderstanding of the role of the costume designer by referring to them as "stylists," he also devalues their role in creating characters and helping producers and creators make their vision a reality. He is essentially arguing that the characters' looks are a creation of the showrunners and not of the costume designers, erasing the designers' labor and inflating the role producers play in order to justify not involving designers in fashion collections.

Kearns believes that sometimes a designer is left out due to costs, other times it is thought that looks can be easily replicated without them.[102] She points out that something with a long-running cultural history like *Man of Steel* (2013) "doesn't need Michael Wilkinson… to sell Superman," so it makes no sense for them business-wise to involve and compensate another person.[103] At the end of the day, costume designs are not licensed out to highlight the designer's work but to promote media content, so the designer is considered unnecessary. In this "celebrity focused world," it can be hard to get attention on costume designers. When Kearns approaches brands about deals for Perez, for instance, many will say they are a fan of his work but ask if Mindy Kaling can be involved somehow as well.[104] Kearns described three reasons why it is difficult to get licensed fashion deals with costume designers. Firstly, "the networks and studios are trying to do more on their own." Secondly, brands are more interested in working with "influencers with mass reach because that helps

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[101] Peter Leeb quoted in Friedlander, "Costume Designers Often Left Out."

[102] Friedlander, "Costume Designers Often Left Out."

[103] Linda Kearns, interview, September 5, 2019.

[104] Linda Kearns, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

get their word out there." Nordstrom, for example, would rather put out a line with influencer Arielle Charnas's blog-turned-clothing brand Something Navy than collaborate with a costume designer. Finally, Kearns says the market is overloaded. There is so much content that "nothing stands out."[105]

If people within the media industry are mostly ignorant about what costume designers do and the value they add to IP, it follows that people outside the industry would not think about costume designers' involvement in licensing deals either. Former journalist Lisa Granshaw, who specialized in writing about licensed geek fashion, admitted she had not thought much about costume designers' role in licensing deals and just "assumed they had to talk to them about it behind-the-scenes."[106] When Kearns passed by a store window featuring the aforementioned John Varvatos *Game of Thrones* collection, she sent a photo of the store window to the CDG who created a social media post calling the brand out for not crediting Clapton. Many costume designers responded and vowed not to shop there anymore, which got the brand's attention and started a dialogue between them and the CDG. The people at John Varvatos admitted that working with the costume designer had not crossed their minds, and they just did what HBO told them to do. Perez explains: "I don't think it's a vindictive thing or a vicious thing. I think it's an education thing. We need to teach them. If you keep us involved, you start this early, you can make a lot of money."[107] For these changes to occur, costume designers and academics must continue working to bridge the gap between scholarship and practice, boosting awareness costume designers and

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[105] Linda Kearns, interview, September 5, 2019.

[106] Lisa Granshaw, interview, August 30, 2019.

[107] Salvador Perez, phone interview, August 31, 2018.

their rights, and aiding advocates like Deborah Nadoolman Landis and Linda Kearns in raising the profile of costume designers.

CREATORS WITH CAPITAL

Costume designers know the value of their creative labor and that they are uniquely positioned among media workers to create things that "can be marketed to the masses and launch cultural trends."[108] Landis has pointed out how "costume can transcend its original function, and take on a life of its own in the public embrace," becoming a cultural phenomenon.[109] Bryant's *Mad Men* designs, for example, launched a nationwide demand for retro fashion among viewers and non-viewers alike. She became a name brand of her own and gained an amount of celebrity still uncommon for costume designers in the late 2000s. Looking back, Bryant acknowledges that her work on the series "basically changed the face of fashion on a worldwide level" and is amazed to think of the amount of fashion collections inspired by *Mad Men* as well as "how much money was earned off of those collections."[110] Avi Santo points out that "licensing has historically served as a key site for transforming intellectual properties into cultural commodities."[111] It is through tangible merchandise that fictional characters earn their staying power, but IP owners have failed to recognize the additional value costume designers could bring to licensing deals. Costume designers are not mindless worker bees but creators with a personal investment in their work and a right to control its use. They add value through authenticity and their unique viewpoint, which can lead to higher profits for everyone. If other creative professionals

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[108] Longwell, "Costume Designers Fight Gender Bias and Pay Inequality."

[109] Landis, *Screencraft: Costume Design*, 10.

[110] Janie Bryant, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[111] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*, 8

receive residuals for the ongoing use of their work, it only makes sense that costume designers should receive some type of monetary compensation as well.

CREATORS/STORYTELLERS

Although media production is collaborative, projects are often associated with only one creative author—the film director or television showrunner. Furthermore, the legal author or owner of the IP is typically a studio, network, or production company. Still, each person on the production creates their own part of the story and may experience the feeling of "authorship even when there is no legal authorship."[112] Costume designers consider themselves authors who create characters' identities and tell stories through clothing, yet their role is often downplayed or belittled due to gender bias and a general misunderstanding of what the job entails. Especially at a time when transmedia storytelling has become the norm, costume designers are not just tasked with designing clothes but contributing to "the art of world making."[113] Their costume designs may be used across multiple texts, not just the primary film or series. The sheer scale of these transmedia projects requires extra labor, while the complex corporate structures ensure that those who perform it get lost in the cracks. Jenkins explains that each new addition to a transmedia story makes a "distinctive and valuable contribution" with each medium doing "what it does best."[114] Although Jenkins is referring to additional texts like video games or webseries, clothing is also a storytelling medium that excels at creating character, while fan fashion tie-ins offer the best means for embodying characters and integrating the text into one's identity and everyday life.

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[112] Stahl, "Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds," 59.

[113] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 21.

[114] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 98.

While costume designers know that their work is not legally theirs, they still consider themselves authors,[115] storytellers,[116] and creators[117] and feel a sense of ownership over what they create. Johnson argues that creative laborers contributing to a transmedia franchise become "stakeholders that, even when lacking ownership of a shared property, develop vested interests in its ongoing productive use."[118] For example, when Kalfus was adapting her *Annie* (2014) costumes into a fashion collection for Target, she thought beyond the design of the product into its future—thinking about how consumers might engage with it and produce their own meanings. Creatives like Kalfus infuse the products they make with life, animating them by investing a part of themselves into their creative labor. Jeff Trexler believes that if a designer knows they are getting a financial stake in their work and "get some reward from it being exploited," then they will have more personal investment in it and "be more likely to create that original material."[119]

Part of what reinforces feelings of authorship and attachment to one's work is the collapse of personal and professional identity that is common among creative laborers. When work is personal, professional success provides a sense of personal satisfaction. Dan Lawson sees a costume designer's ability to "contribute to the industry as a whole" as something "empowering and completely thrilling."[120] However, this also means that setbacks and criticism can be hurtful, because work is "very much a part of who you are and

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[115] Renee Ehrlich Kalfus, interview, August 21, 2018.

[116] Salvador Perez, phone interview, August 31, 2018.

[117] Janie Bryant, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[118] Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 7.

[119] Jeff Trexler, interview, September 30, 2019.

[120] Daniel Lawson, phone interview, March 2, 2019.

your identity… very intertwined with your whole emotional self."[121] These social-psychological effects add an important personal aspect to the issues of authorship and ownership. IP owners do not just own a creative's work but a small part of who they are. According to Locke's labor theory of value, creators are entitled to the fruits of their labor. As David Lea explains in his interpretation of Locke, "that which one has transformed through labor is no longer part of nature but becomes invested with the self and thereby linked in a relation of ownership with the human subject."[122] When someone works with raw materials, they add value to them through their creative labor and thus earn some right to ownership. As Matt Stahl writes, the issue is about "*natural* authors unfairly denied rights attaching to *legal* authorship."[123] This is not just the norm in the media industry but a problem across industries, as United States courts refuse to acknowledge the collective nature of creative work and instead tend to assign rights to singular authors that are corporations.[124] Although costume designers know the costumes are ultimately the result of their entire team's labor, costume designers referring to themselves as authors or creators serves the rhetorical function of elevating their status, which gives them more leverage in the fight for pay equity and partial ownership of their IP.

Using the creations of work-for-hire employees beyond their original intent may be the industry norm, but it is not necessarily ethical, as it exploits creative laborers. Drawing on Marx, Mark Andrejevic states that exploitation "is not simply about a loss of monetary

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[121] Stahl, "Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds," 62.

[122] David Lea, "From Wright Brothers to Microsoft: Issues in the Moral Grounding of Intellectual Property Rights," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (2006): 583.

[123] Stahl, "Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds," 60.

[124] Andrew Ross, "Technology and Below-the-Line Labor in the Copyfight over Intellectual Property," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2006): 746.

value, but also a loss of control over one's productive and creative activity."[125] Beyond the film or series, costume designers' work can be used by IP owners without them having any say or receiving further credit or compensation. However, naturalist theories on copyright "assume that authors have expansive rights over their creative outputs… by the author's labour (the Lockean approach) or because it is a materialisation of her personality (per Kant and Hegel)."[126] In the Kantian view, the issue is not necessarily about violating someone's right to their own property but of violating their right to be their own person and do with that property what they wish.[127] In discussing a Kantian, rights-based approach to intellectual property, Rita Risser suggests that people "have a right to their works both as the result of, and as integral to, their dignity and self-authority."[128] It is about respecting the individual and allowing them to have a say in what happens to the fruits of their labor. *Transparent* (2014-2019) costume designer Marie Schley explains how costumes provide "a way for the audience to relate to the show. When you're looking at the actor, you're looking at the clothes. It's a question of why that isn't more respected."[129] Alienating costume designers from their work and allowing it to be simplified and devalued for the sake of profit does not show much respect for them as individuals.

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[125] Mark Andrejevic, "Estranged Free Labor" in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, ed. Trebor Scholz (New York: Routledge, 2013), 154.

[126] Rebecca Giblin and Kimberlee Weatherall, "If we redesigned copyright from scratch, what might it look like?" in *What if We Could Reimagine Copyright?* (Acton: Australian National University Press, 2017), 17.

[127] Rita Risser, "Creative Determinism and the Claim to Intellectual Property," *The Monist* 93, no. 3 (2010): 364.

[128] Risser, "Creative Determinism and the Claim to Intellectual Property," 363.

[129] Marie Schley quoted in Whitney Friedlander, "Women in Art Director, Costume Groups Are Still Fighting for Equality," *Variety*, November 1, 2016, https://variety.com/2016/biz/news/art-director-costumes-groups-gender-inequality-1201905400/.

However, most arguments against the concept of owning one's intellectual property are based on capitalism's focus on profits, not ethics. Industry executives and "corporate PR guns shamelessly cite the labor of poor struggling artists" when working to expand IP protection, but those artists are rarely the ones that benefit.[130] The IP owners are most often corporations, not creators. John Ladd thinks ownership rights have been misapplied to intellectual phenomena, since the concept of property has three basic elements that Ladd thinks are incompatible with IP: the right to exclude, the right to use, the right to dispose or alienate (sell or give away). You do not lose IP because someone else uses it, all you lose is the chance to make money.[131] Ladd paraphrases Sam Goldwyn, saying that the nice thing about the film industry is that "you could make money without having to lose ownership of the product or production."[132] Unfortunately, this is only true for legal owners, not natural authors. Costume designers lose ownership of their product and the right to make money from it the moment they sign their work-for-hire contract. Nevertheless, a designer's work is the result of their intellectual endeavors and creative energy, so they deserve the right to control its use and reap its benefits.

CULTURAL CAPITAL & AUTHENTICITY

Despite continuing issues with proper credit and compensation, more designers are being recognized for the value they add to projects on and offscreen. During the Classical Hollywood era, the leading studio designers like Adrian, Orry-Kelly, Royer, Edward Stevenson, Edith Head, and Walter Plunkett were "as familiar to [*Photoplay*] readers as the

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[130] Ross, "Technology and Below-the-Line Labor," 759.

[131] Lea, "From Wright Brothers to Microsoft," 580.

[132] Lea, "From Wright Brothers to Microsoft," 581.

stars themselves."[133] Thanks to the rise of social media and consequent normalization of fannish practices, costume designers enjoyed increasing visibility throughout the late 2000s and 2010s. One used to have to search end credits for the costume designer's name, now it is a quick IMDB search away as well as their bio and a list of their other work. Information flows freely and knowledge that was once only held by the most devout fans is now known to people who do not even engage with the original media. Landis notes "an explosion of awareness" of costume designers in the second half of the 2010s thanks to the easily accessible digital content on YouTube featuring costume designers as well as increasing attempts to educate the public.[134] Ann Roth also noticed the increasing engagement with costume design by audiences and critics, thanks in part to social media: "There are a lot more conversations on social media about costumes, as much as any discussion about lighting or set design."[135] Several websites and social media accounts track TV costumes, enabling fans to easily find out what characters wore and encouraging them to dissect the costumes. Costume designers are once again becoming celebrities in their own right, and their name alone can add value to a licensed fashion collection.

There have been some small shifts in the media industry's attitude toward costume designers throughout the 2010s, mainly that studios and networks seemed more interested in licensing deals and doing more PR with costume designers.[136] Costume designer Laura Jean Shannon of *The Boys* (2019-) received on-screen recognition when the character A-

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[133] Eckert, "The Carole Lombard in Macy's Window," 108.

[134] Landis, "Hollywood Costume: A Journey to Curation," 176.

[135] Ann Roth quoted in Jazz Tangcay, "Costume Designers Discuss Pay Inequality: 'This is About Feeling Devalued,'" *Variety*, February 6, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/artisans/awards/costume-designers-pay-equity-1203487872/.

[136] Linda Kearns, interview, September 5, 2019.

train said he "had LJ redesign the suit." Shannon had already been established as the in-world costume designer the previous season when *The Boys* PR team interviewed her "in character" as the costume designer of the fictional films that exist within the series. Nevertheless, hearing her name in an episode felt especially rewarding. Shannon shared with the CDG that it was "a great day for all of us CD's to find collaborative partners like these who respect and reward the work we all do."[137] In the quote, Shannon implicitly acknowledges that being respected and rewarded is a special circumstance for many costume designers. At the same time, her situation shows that collaborative partnerships exist and can help improve their chances of being treated equitably. Still, one has to wonder whether or not she was paid for her time in front of the camera since, as previously mentioned, costume designers' contracts only cover their work on the costumes. But at a time when marketing and branding have renewed importance in the media industry, the expectation to participate in these types of promotional materials is becoming more normalized. The increase in this type of content is symptomatic of the "shift from an older emphasis on product and pricing to carefully targeted emotional, therapeutic, and 'relationship' branding strategies."[138] The most effective marketing in the social media age establishes a strong brand identity and engages the consumer on a personal level. However, all the behind-the-scenes and promotional content required to build that corporate identity requires additional (often free) labor from media workers. Although behind-the-scenes videos are not new, they are a newly valued genre that helps "exploit artistic buzz and spike economic profits"[139] by providing a human face to the corporate brand identity.

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[137] COSTUME DESIGNERS GUILD 892, Facebook post, June 27, 2022.

[138] Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 245.

[139] Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 284.

Costume designers are gaining more name recognition, but the real value they add is authenticity through their creative vision and deep understanding of the story world. As Trexler points out, the media industry is one of "natural synergies," so it only makes sense to "make your costume designers stars… [and] take advantage of those brands."[140] Many fashion brands have been trying to get into character licensing but have had "varying degrees of success, 'cause they don't understand the secret sauce" or what encourages fans' attachment to characters.[141] A good adaptation recontextualizes a story while staying true to the meaning of the original work. Licensing out costume adaptations and not involving the costume designer risks losing what makes the original costumes special, their true meaning. Perez believes that involving costume designers in licensed fashion collections will make them more profitable, since the designs are more authentic. Otherwise, it is just "a diluted version of what we did."[142] Kearns echoed that statement in our interview, saying that without a costume designer involved, "you don't have a voice of the collection." From a business standpoint, not taking advantage of costume designers' cache leaves money on the table for networks and studios as well as the additional buzz created by a celebrity costume designer.[143] As Landis writes, "Our work sells shows and sells product."[144]

For evidence that collaborating with a costume designer on licensed fashion collections ensures success, one can look to Aeropostle's 2014 collaboration with *Pretty Little Liars* costume designer Mandi Line, Paolo's 2014 *Scandal* collection at The Limited,

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[140] Jeff Trexler, interview, September 30, 2019.

[141] Jeff Trexler, interview, September 30, 2019.

[142] Salvador Perez, phone interview, August 31, 2018.

[143] Linda Kearns, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[144] Landis, "President's Letter," *The Costume Designer* (Summer 2006): 6.

and Bryant's *Mad Men* for Banana Republic collections in 2011, 2012, and 2013. Bryant believes involving the costume designer makes licensed fashion collections more successful, because "there is a face and a name to designing the collection."[145] Collaborating with a costume designer on a licensed fashion collection is not just about the physical merchandise they create but "a viewpoint that can be capitalized on as well."[146] Perez visited BaubleBar with the intention of buying jewelry for *The Mindy Project*. While he was there, he commented on how he liked certain pieces but wanted to customize them a bit. The BaubleBar people liked his perspective so much, they asked him to design a collection.[147] Although it was not a licensed *Mindy Project* collection, the cache Perez gained through that series and the strong aesthetic he brought to it ultimately got him the deal. Licensing executive Platner agrees that costume designers add "to the authenticity and the value of the product."[148]

Nevertheless, most studios and networks have been slow to take advantage of the added value a costume designer's perspective brings, instead leveraging the social and cultural capital earned by costume designers for their own economic gain.[149] The title of a 2021 *Refinery29* article gets right to the heart of the matter: "Costume Designers Are Stars On Social Media. So Why Aren't They Being Paid That Way?" Writer Frances Solá-Santiago refers to the role of televised awards shows and social media in raising the profile of costume designers as well as the numerous Instagram accounts dedicated to tracking

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[145] Janie Bryant, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[146] Linda Kearns, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[147] Salvador Perez, phone interview, August 31, 2018.

[148] Maggie Platner, phone interview, September 6, 2018.

[149] Caldwell, "Stress Aesthetics," 102-103.

costumes for various television series, but admits that designers "often don't receive the acknowledgement they deserve behind the scenes."[150] AMC initially questioned Kearns about the deals she was making for Bryant, making sure they were not using *Mad Men* IP. Kearns explained that she was making deals for Bryant—it was the press and others saying *Mad Men*. Eventually, AMC applauded Kearns' and Bryant's efforts, "because they realized that the fashion aspect of the show was bringing them new viewers and getting them press that they weren't getting."[151] As will be discussed in the next section, creative laborers today are encouraged to create a personal brand and promote themselves online. Alice Marwick notes two potential and serious drawbacks to this entrepreneurial approach: the possibility of seeming "narcissistic or uninterested in others" and "the risk of being fired by a more traditional company for engaging in self-branding."[152] Bryant may not have been at risk of being fired, but it is clear that AMC was initially threatened by her creating and promoting herself as a brand. Once the network realized they could benefit from the increased cultural capital Bryant was gaining for herself, they were happy to exploit it.

Unfortunately, like studio executives, most people in the fashion industry do not understand media production or the value costume designers can add. *Vogue* only started mentioning costume designers in the late 2010s and is still inconsistent about crediting costume designers when discussing and referencing the influence of film and television on fashion. Kearns believes that it would make a big difference for costume designers if somebody like *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour were to embrace them.[153] However, the fashion

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[150] Solá-Santiago, "Costume Designers Are Stars On Social Media."

[151] Linda Kearns, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[152] Marwick, *Status Update*, 200.

[153] Linda Kearns, interview, September 5, 2019.

industry is more focused on influencers and celebrities than behind-the-scenes creative laborers. Although costume designers' visibility on social media has increased, their reach is still negligible compared to that of some fashion bloggers and influencers.[154] Nevertheless, Dan Lawson and *The Good Wife* star Juliana Margulies were recognized by the Accessories Council as style influencers of the year, due to the "mass marketing of our viewpoint, of our aesthetic, and how it has affected the fashion industry as a whole." Lawson acknowledges that it was "a pretty big deal" to be recognized by the fashion world as a costume designer.[155] However, his reference to the mass marketing of costume designers' viewpoints implies that costume designers are being viewed as commodities. While commodification "expands a group's cultural visibility… commodification is also a form of exploitation," according to Jenkins.[156] It is important that executives remain aware of the person behind the viewpoint and value them properly.

If fashion brands requested costume designers for collaborations, IP owners would be much more likely to try to include them. Banana Republic initially attempted to market a selection of clothes from their collection using the *Mad Men* name and were mostly unsuccessful, mainly because they tried to capitalize on the caché created by Bryant without actually involving her. Simon Kneen, Banana Republic's Creative Director, realized the value Bryant would bring and asked her to design a special *Mad Men* collection for Banana Republic for Autumn/Winter 2011. It was so successful, she ended up doing another collection for Spring/Summer 2012. Following the collection's release, Banana Republic saw

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[154] Linda Kearns, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[155] Daniel Lawson, phone interview, March 2, 2019.

[156] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 62.

same-store sales rise 5%, leading to a first-quarter best of $622 million.[157] Unsurprisingly, they asked Bryant to design a third collection for them for Spring/Summer 2013. Bryant insists that these types of collections "always do better when the costume designer is designing the collections or behind the collections or promoting the collections or the face of the collections."[158] Banana Republic saw Bryant's value and realized that it is to everyone's advantage to include costume designers in the process of adapting their work into fashion.

WHAT DESIGNERS DESERVE

Costume designers add value through their creative labor, name recognition, and personal investment in their creations. Licensing out someone's costume designs with consulting, crediting, or compensating them is exploitative and unethical. The costume designer's role has changed. Hiring terms and profit shares need to change too. As Appleton and Yankelevits point out, new approaches to marketing, branding, and merchandising "raise many new issues for dealmakers, including what rights to ask for in their agreements and how these rights will be compensated."[159] But how can an entrenched norm in the entertainment industry be uprooted and reimagined? Studios set very strict parameters for negotiations and will rarely break precedent. As an advocate for costume designers, Kearns has seen very little change in Hollywood after several years of working in the field. Designers should get residuals or a percentage of sales when their work is used, but studio executives are not willing to accept such a radical change, especially when it means splitting profits with more people. The money comes from the retailer to the IP owners, so it is

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[157] Sapna Maheshwari, "Gap Channels Best Quarter With Banana Republic's Mad Men: Retail," *Bloomberg*, May 28, 2012, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-05-29/gap-channels-best-quarter-with-banana-republic-s-mad-men-retail#xj4y7vzkg.

[158] Janie Bryant, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[159] Appleton and Yankelevits, *Hollywood Dealmaking*, 25.

partially a matter of figuring out if brands would pay designers directly or if the studio/network would pay out like a royalty. Essentially, the bottom line is profit, and people do not want to pay employees more than they are required to. But costume designers' contributions to licensed collections, whether it is in design or name, add value and lead to more profits. Theoretically, there would be more profits to share and thus it would not cut into IP owners' overall revenue.

As previously mentioned, the importance of licensed merchandise has escalated due to shifts in consumer patterns and the rise of streaming. For studios and networks, "all screenplays are branding opportunities."[160] IP owners are able to offset profit losses elsewhere through brand partnerships and merchandising, yet costume designers are not afforded the same opportunity to balance out insufficient wages with the additional profits their work generates. Landis calls out this issue, among others, in her Fall 2006 "President's Letter" in *The Costume Designer* through a series of rhetorical questions including: "Perhaps if we were paid equitably for our contribution to the artistic and financial success of the production—the merchandising cash cow would be more tolerable?"[161] The contract between the United Scenic Artists Local 829 in New York and The Off-Broadway League states that designers maintain ownership and licensing rights over their work. Unlike the film and television industry, any additional use of theatre designers' work must be covered under a new agreement. That clause could easily and logically be adapted for CDG Local 892 contracts as well.[162] Residuals are a major source of income for many in the industry and

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[160] Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 232.

[161] Landis, "President's Letter," *The Costume Designer* (Fall 2006): 7.

[162] The full text of this contract and other collective bargaining agreements are available on the Local 829 website: https://www.usa829.org/Contracts/Collective-Bargaining-Agreements-CBAs/Theatre-Opera-Dance.

keep them afloat between jobs. However, the people who get the best residuals are the ones who make enough money on the job to stay afloat without them. IATSE West Coast Locals receive a percentage of profits from all union productions, which have been invested in a pension and health plan since the mid-1960s. While this provides below-the-line workers with health care and a "robust pension plan,"[163] they do not receive additional profit-shares or remuneration when their designs are used for merchandising, like a costume on a Barbie doll. However, as Stahl reiterates in his work, distinctions like "the line" between creative and technical workers and the difference in privileges each group enjoys "appear durable and natural even though they too are the result of historical struggle."[164] These distinctions are another area that need to be re-examined in the contemporary media environment.

Alan Paul and Archie Kleingartner date residuals to at least 1941 when the American Federation of Radio Artists' Transcription Code required performers be paid royalties whenever their recorded program was replayed. The justification was that each time a recording was played, it was one less chance for work.[165] The same can be said for when creative work is used outside of the film or series it was intended for. That is one less design or writing job someone is getting hired for. Stahl quotes an industry veteran saying that residuals are based on the idea that you can never really and fully buy someone else's IP,[166] which aligns with a rights-based approach that people have a natural right to the fruits of their labor. There are always going to be economically-motivated reasons for not paying people when their work is used elsewhere, but that does not mean that workers should not

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[163] Landis, email communication, May 22, 2022. More information on the Motion Picture Industry Pension and Health Plans can be found on their website: https://www.mpiphp.org/home.

[164] Stahl, "Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds," 58.

[165] Stahl, "Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds," 59.

[166] Stahl, "Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds," 59.

push back. LA city council member Bill Rosendahl said, "Profits are up. Those profits need to be shared with the *people who create the product*."[167]

Costume Designer Deena Appel wrote a feature in the Fall 2006 of the CDG magazine *The Costume Designer* on "When Costumes Become Merchandise." Appel writes, "As storytellers, we create memorable characters that live long after the movie is over. We invent iconic images that generate tremendous earnings and are marketable in more ways than we can imagine."[168] Appel refers to the previous height of costume merchandising in the 1930s when Hollywood designers like Adrian and Edith Head would profit off the adaptation of their film costumes into fashions, though acknowledges that those designers had studio contracts rather than being work-for-hire. However, as Appel points out, composers are work-for-hire and still have partial ownership over their music and receive royalties for its use: "The next time you hear a television theme song or film score that instantly identifies a favorite old show, visualize any signature costume and it will have the same nostalgic effect."[169] Despite costume's power to evoke an emotional and nostalgic reaction in audiences, entrenched gender bias in the IATSE contracts has made it especially challenging for costume designers to improve upon traditional pay standards and create a new norm within the industry.

Most costume designers feel they deserve something and are frustrated over the exploitation of their work, "especially when we see actors, musicians, even ADs get residuals on their work but costume designers don't."[170] While some believe that the best way to make

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[167] Bill Rosendahl quoted in Stahl, "Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds," 60.

[168] Deena Appel, "When Costumes Become Merchandise," *The Costume Designer* (Fall 2006): 16.

[169] Appel, "When Costumes Become Merchandise," 17.

[170] Salvador Perez, phone interview, August 31, 2018.

a difference is to speak out on the issue, Bryant believes that the best way to change the current system is to focus less on issues and more on what you want: "I feel like that's the only way that it can be changed, in a positive way." Nevertheless, she agreed that if other creatives get residuals, costume designers should get something as well, like a design fee and percentage of sales.[171] Kalfus also believes that a design fee and percentage of sales is fair compensation for collaborating on a licensed fashion collection.[172] In some cases, Kearns has secured her clients royalties plus a design fee, other times just a design fee, sometimes a marketing fee—"Every deal is different. There's no standard deal."[173] Getting the people involved in licensing deals to break tradition and compensate costume designers involves educating them about the scope of the job and the labor involved. As Kearns lays out, "it's a lot of work," as it is not just about designing the clothing but doing special appearances and press for the launch, styling ads, and performing additional tasks required to produce and release a fashion collection.[174] However, as you can see from the conflicting quotes and perspectives in this chapter, not everyone is on board, not everyone has the same level of interest or commitment, and not everyone agrees about the best way to go about this. That is why change is taking so long and may never happen. But as long as technology keeps advancing as quickly as it is, the realities of media production and the lives of creative workers will continue to change. Industry practices can and should evolve in tandem.

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[171] Janie Bryant, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[172] Renee Ehrlich Kalfus, interview, August 21, 2018.

[173] Linda Kearns, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[174] Linda Kearns, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

EDUCATION, ADVOCACY, & BRANDING

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, there is a tension between hopefulness and helplessness surrounding this topic. Small changes have been made, but not without years and years of advocacy and hard work. It is clear that costume designers deserve credit and compensation when their work is used for licensed merchandise, and many would like the opportunity to collaborate on these projects. However, it has been difficult for a group plagued by gender bias to make significant changes in this area, especially when they are still fighting for basic pay equity. While this has left costume designers and their advocates feeling frustrated, it also motivates them to continue raising awareness about the issues costume designers face and the value they bring. Thanks to the widespread use of social media, the CDG and individual costume designers have been able to bring more public attention to this ongoing fight for proper credit and pay equity. Some directors and showrunners are now advocating for their costume designers to be involved in marketing and licensing deals, and ensuring they are properly credited and compensated for their additional labor. But, as has been repeatedly stated, Hollywood is resistant to change. Costume designers are continuing to fight but also know they cannot wait around for things to change. To reclaim power and control, some costume designers are focusing on self-branding and securing deals with fashion brands on their own. In this sense, they are turning the tables on IP owners—capitalizing on the cache they earned from their association with certain IP and turning that cultural capital into economic capital.

CDG CAMPAIGNS & COMMUNITY-BUILDING

As discussed earlier in the chapter, the CDG leadership has worked hard to educate and advocate on behalf of its members for the past seventy years. While continuing to fight the battle for basic pay equity, they are also fighting new issues discussed in this chapter, like the increased use of their work outside the original project and the expectation of

additional labor for marketing and promotions. However, it is difficult to advocate for additional compensation and control when you are still not properly compensated for your primary role. Thus, the CDG as a collective remains primarily focused on closing the pay gap between them and production designers, while costume designers are expected to handle issues of merchandising and promotional work on an individual level in their deal memos. Still, this fight for overall pay equity is beneficial to the fight for compensation from licensed merchandise, since it is ultimately about getting designers the respect they deserve and acknowledging the complexity and depth of their work.

Although the CDG still lacks the power of a larger organization like the Writer's Guild, they have taken steps throughout their history to gain strength by uniting their members. In 1997, Landis gathered a group of costume designers for lunch, including Albert Wolsky, Joanna Johnston, Michael Kaplan, Mary Rose, Hope Hanafin, Jeffrey Kurland, and Ellen Mirojnick. The designers debated the pros and cons of starting an awards ceremony. Their goal was to "build solidarity among Costume Designers, not drive another wedge between" them by placing them in competition with one another.[175] At the time, costume designers were not fully united in the fight against bias and ignorance. Landis and the others hoped that a celebration of their work would help create a sense of community in addition to forwarding their agenda of educating the industry, press, and public about "the art of costume design."[176] Thus, the Costume Designers Guild Awards were born. This yearly celebration continues to unite the community through celebration and education.

In addition to the CDG Awards, the CDG's trade magazine *The Costume Designer* has played a key role in uniting and strengthening the community. The magazine was first

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[175] Landis, "President's Letter," *The Costume Designer* (Winter 2007): 6.

[176] Landis, "President's Letter," *The Costume Designer* (Winter 2007): 6.

published in Fall 2005 under the leadership of CDG president Landis with Sharon Day serving as the magazine's staff editor. Scholar Helen Warner's analysis of the publication reveals how the rhetoric of CDG leadership and magazine contributors forged a sense of group identity among Guild members. Warner applies a "gendered lens" to Caldwell's work on production cultures,[177] which focuses mostly on the trade stories of male practitioners that are "organized around a 'masculine' value system."[178] By considering the historical and social context from which the trade stories in *The Costume Designer* emerge, Warner reveals how they function as "subversive acts of 'speaking out' against a neoliberal production culture that attempts to silence them."[179] Indeed, I have stressed the importance of gender bias in exacerbating the difficulties costume designers face, particularly the desire for respect and acknowledgement of their importance to storytelling. After all, clothing is coded as feminine and costume design as women's work. Rather than fighting this association with femininity, Warner shows how contributors use motherhood as a metaphor to describe the work of costume design, as a reference point for comparing the affective labor required of them, and as a narrative device that establishes shared values among CDG members.[180] Furthermore, the anecdotes found in the magazine emphasize "the personal," thereby performing the "ideological function" of increasing the CDG's "social power" through the construction of a "collective identity."[181] Overall, the trade magazine's emphasis on "collectivism over individualism" helped create and reinforce a feeling of community

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[177] Helen Warner, "Below-the-(Hem)line: Storytelling as Collective Resistance in Costume Design," *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 1 (2018): 37.

[178] Warner, "Below-the-(Hem)line," 41.

[179] Warner, "Below-the-(Hem)line," 37.

[180] Warner, "Below-the-(Hem)line," 45.

[181] Warner, "Below-the-(Hem)line," 41.

among CDG members that ultimately benefitted their fight for respect and proper remuneration.[182]

Near the end of 2019, leading up to its 2021 contract negotiations with AMPTA, the CDG established a committee to raise awareness of pay inequity and dedicated a portion of the CDG website to the issue. The committee acknowledges that costume design has been disrespected and dismissed as "women's work" since the beginning of the film industry. They continue to emphasize that "This fight is about our VALUE" and the profits their work brings in through licensed merchandise.[183] In a *Variety* article, committee head Kristin Burke referred to the 1949 California Equal Pay Act that ensures equal pay for "substantially similar work," comparing the work of costume designers to production designers, who make about $1000 more per week.[184] Costume designer Ann Roth believes the key to fighting pay inequity is being "more open with each other as costume designers about rates," so people are aware of the issue and can fight for commensurate compensation.[185] Shawna Trpcic echoed that sentiment in her 2022 acceptance speech for *The Book of Boba Fett*, asking her peers to report their wages to the CDG for the sake of ensuring fairness and consistency.[186]

In the section on pay equity on the CDG website, the committee lays out a four-step plan, asking people to "Join the revolution!" First is "Educate," which means that CDG members should be well-versed in the history and statistics associated with gender bias and

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[182] Warner, "Below-the-(Hem)line," 47.

[183] "Pay Equity," *Costume Designers Guild,* https://www.costumedesignersguild.com/pay-equity/.

[184] Hewitt, "Costume Designers Fashion a Plan."

[185] Ann Roth quoted in Tangcay, "Costume Designers Discuss Pay Inequality."

[186] Ingrid Schmidt, "Inside the Costume Designers Guild Awards: Calls for Pay Parity, Expressions of Love for Ukraine," *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 10, 2022, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lifestyle/style/costume-designers-guild-awards-calls-for-pay-equity-1235108467/.

pay inequity so that they can educate others. The next step is to "Initiate" by joining the Pay Equity Committee and/or starting conversations with other departments on-set and bringing people in to help fight for the cause. Then, they are encouraged to "Negotiate" and demand the same pay and benefits as production designers, as well as being open with their colleagues about pay so others can ask for more in the future: "Create a precedent so that others who come after you can benefit from your progress."[187] Again, it is all about breaking tradition one time and giving another designer something to reference. The final step of the committee's plan is to "Advocate" via social media using the hashtags #CDGPayEquity and #NakedWithoutUs. Several people in the industry have posted videos on Instagram in support of costume designers and pay equity using the hashtags, many of which have been reposted on the CDG Instagram page. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the rise of social media changed the way the media industry approaches storytelling and marketing, placing an undue burden on media workers who are not properly compensated for the additional labor. At the same time, social media has enabled the CDG to take their campaign for pay equity online and bring it further into the public eye. Costume designers are learning to harness the power of fans and exploit participatory culture for their own benefit by using their raised public profile to gain more leverage in the industry.

Since 2019, pay equity has also been a recurring theme at the CDG Awards. At the 2019 and 2020 CDG Awards, every guest found a paddle on their seat saying "Pay Equity Now." CDG vice president Catherine Adair addressed the issue in her 2019 speech rhetorically asking if pay inequity "has anything to do with the fact that the CDG is 85% women. I don't know about you, and I don't know about your watch, but mine says 'Time's

[187] "Pay Equity," *Costume Designers Guild*.

up.'"[188] Adair's comment refers to the larger "Time's Up" movement in Hollywood addressing gender discrimination. As Arianne Phillips said at the awards, "This is about feeling devalued," a sentiment echoed by many costume designers, including Ann Roth: "We're not taken seriously when we ask for a rate commensurate with our experience or provide an informed estimate on costs and labor." Roth notes that costume designers are more likely to be questioned than their male counterparts.[189] Costume designer Daniel Selon showed up to the 2022 CDG Awards in a fuchsia suit jacket with "Pay Equity Now" on the back, #CDGPAYEQUITY down one sleeve, and #NAKEDWITHOUTUS written down one pant leg. Selon's comment that night echoes the sentiments shared by advocates like O'Brien and Landis throughout the years: "It can't be repeated enough that costume designers create iconic characters that everyone adores, and they should be compensated commensurate with their creative contribution to the film, television or commercial product."[190]

Although some costume designers have begun to break tradition when it comes to licensing deals, it is still the exception rather than the rule when a designer is consulted, credited, and/or compensated for the additional labor they perform in the contemporary media industry. As previously stated, the CDG does not have the power to affect change on this issue at a group level, especially when they are still focused on basic pay equity. Instead, costume designers are handling the issue on a case-by-case basis and trying to set precedent through their individual contracts. That is not to say that the CDG has ignored the

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[188] Catherine Adair quoted in Katie Kilkenny and Ingrid Schmidt, "Costume Designers Call for 'Pay Equity Now' at Guild Awards," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 28, 2020, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/costume-designers-call-pay-equity-now-at-guild-awards-1274381/.

[189] Tangcay, "Costume Designers Discuss Pay Inequality."

[190] Daniel Selon quoted in Schmidt, "Inside the Costume Designers Guild Awards."

importance of marketing and merchandising, but this is a battle they believe is best achieved through small victories, one step at a time. In the Fall 2006 issue of *The Costume Designer*, Landis wrote that "The battle for merchandising, equitable wages and credit must be fought in the deal memos of our membership. One close relationship may change the paradigm and revolutionize our position."[191] The CDG continues to believe that what benefits one costume designer ultimately benefits them all. They support their members in the endeavor of advocating for themselves by educating them on how to navigate spaces outside of their primary role.

Despite the differences in their roles and status within the Hollywood hierarchy, the deal that ended the 2007-2008 Writers Guild of America (WGA) strike may have set a useful precedent for costume designers, as it acknowledged the unique challenges media workers face in the age of convergence and transmedia storytelling and their right to be compensated for the additional labor. Since the deal involved web content that included actors, Mann suggests that it could potentially serve as "a prototype for future deals with the Screen Actors Guild as well."[192] So, if it could be used as a prototype for actors, why not for other creatives as well? One of the issues between WGA leadership and studio/network management was how to define this ancillary content that was somewhere between "art and hype."[193] The studios claimed it qualified as promotional content or advertising, whereas the writers claimed it was storytelling and they deserved compensation. Mann points out how the studios exploited "traditional models of TV series authorship to protect their financial back end" while expecting the same writers to break from this model and create marketing

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[191] Landis, "President's Letter," *The Costume Designer* (Fall 2006): 7.

[192] Mann, "It's Not TV," 110.

[193] Mann, "It's Not TV," 110.

content.[194] This is not unlike studios' and networks' expectation that costume designers forfeit their rights to their intellectual property with work-for-hire contracts while simultaneously working to promote that IP for no added benefits. While the CDG may not be able to replicate the WGA strike, at the very least, the deal opened the door for studios and networks to acknowledge and compensate the additional labor media workers perform. This creates space for individual costume designers (like Janie Bryant) who have the cultural capital to negotiate for proper remuneration in their deal memos, thereby setting precedent that future designers can point to.

HELP FROM HIGHER-UPS

It might just take one powerful executive at a major studio seeing costume designers' value to make widespread change happen. Directors and showrunners can be very involved in the licensing process, if they want to be. David Lynch's contract requires that he approves every *Twin Peaks* licensed product, and Platner regularly sent *Penny Dreadful* creator John Logan designs for licensed products, "so he sort of had a stamp on a lot of it**."**[195] However, licensed products are typically handled by licensing and marketing departments as well as "the folks who are promoting the show in general."[196] Nevertheless, the creatives at the top have the power to bring costume designers into the fold and make changes from the outside. Kearns sees "the obstacle being the networks and studios, and the facilitator being someone who's a champion within the property itself."[197] Having this powerful creative on the inside "may be the most powerful thing" to facilitate costume designers' involvement in licensing

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[194] Mann, "It's Not TV," 110.

[195] Maggie Platner, phone interview, September 6, 2018.

[196] Maggie Platner, phone interview, September 6, 2018.

[197] Linda Kearns, interview, September 5, 2019.

deals.[198] *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner was very involved in the Banana Republic deal and supportive of Bryant's involvement.[199] She said "he has such a great appreciation for costume designer and such an appreciation for me and my work, and that's really why I think those things happened, because he really respects the craft and design areas."[200] Having people higher up to support her, as well as having an advocate like Kearns, has helped Bryant enjoy a great deal of success in the costume and fashion worlds. Arianne Phillips was brought in to design a *Kingsman* collection for Mr. Porter because the film's director Matthew Vaughn knew her value. Kalfus had such a good experience with the Target collection in part because she had the support of *Annie*'s director Will Gluck, with whom she has a long-term collaborative relationship, and the producer John Lassiter.

The other most effective way to get designers involved in licensing deals is to be proactive. Kearns coaches the costume designers she works with to think strategically about possible deals from the beginning. For example, when Bryant went back to work on *Deadwood: The Movie* (2019), Kearns began asking questions about the designs' marketability and wanted to reach out the PR team in advance. When Perez began working on the series *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, Kearns suggested he "partner with a brand going into the production."[201] In the past, Kearns has gotten deals by initiating them rather than waiting for them to happen, then retroactively trying to get the designer involved. For example, she brought the *Pretty Little Liars* collection to ABC Family. As someone who has

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[198] Linda Kearns, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[199] Linda Kearns, interview, September 5, 2019.

[200] Janie Bryant, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

[201] Linda Kearns, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

a foot in the fashion industry as well, Kearns is better positioned than media licensing executives to find apparel brands that are good matches for their content.[202]

My focus on costume designers is not because they are the only creative laborers being overlooked and undervalued. The sad truth is that exploitation in the media industry is so pervasive that I could not possibly cover all of it, so I have chosen this specific group in this specific moment. Nevertheless, I would be remiss not to acknowledge that as much as costume designers feel that they do not get the respect they deserve, the people who work under them feel even more anonymous and invisible. As an assistant costume designer, I was often responsible for dressing all the background characters in a scene while the costume designer focused on the lead characters, which is not an insignificant contribution. Yet very few people can name the assistant costume designers on famous films, even if they know the costume designers. Without fabricators and technical workers, fantasy costumes would remain fantasies. Just as directors, producers, and showrunners can use their power to elevate costume designers, costume designers can "pay it forward" by supporting those working under them. Dan Lawson believes that everyone on his team brings an equal contribution to the project and tries to be supportive of them and conscious of their needs, "because then everybody feels like they are contributing to their highest level."[203] Although the explosion of streaming content has further complicated the issue of profit shares for talent and creators,[204] more job openings for costume designers enables them to be less competitive and more supportive of one another, reinforcing the sense of community that

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[202] Linda Kearns, interview, September 5, 2019.

[203] Daniel Lawson, phone interview, March 2, 2019.

[204] Angus Finney, "Streamers Help Reignite Big Battles Over Film and TV Profit Participation," *Variety*, January 15, 2022, https://variety.com/2022/film/spotlight/streamers-help-reignite-big-battles-over-film-and-tv-profit-participation-1235154957/.

CDG leadership has worked hard to build throughout its history. Lawson believes "it has made a much tighter-knit community than it used to be… I feel the support and I know they feel me supporting them too."[205] Lawson also sees less competition as a consequence of the increased visibility that costume designers have received. Recognition means costume designers are no longer "clawing for attention" and can thus relax and support one another.[206]

BUILDING A PERSONAL BRAND

Despite repeated pushes for costume designers to be involved with and compensated for promotional work and licensed merchandise, it seems unlikely that it will become the norm any time soon. Perez knows that costume designers are "not going to win against the studio," and instead encourages them to use social media to "empower themselves and their work."[207] In the transmedia age, when the creative and the commercial are blending together, it is important to understand both worlds. Mann argues that "power and potency" come from understanding "the corporate ethos inherent in creating and selling a successful multiplatform TV brand," or any type of brand for that matter.[208] McRobbie similarly argues that an understanding of business is now seen as "integral and actively incorporated into the artistic identity."[209] Costume designers who understand the business side of things and know how to brand themselves have an advantage. They have built up their personal brands and secured deals for themselves, with the help of Kearns and Matchbook Company.

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[205] Daniel Lawson, phone interview, March 2, 2019.

[206] Daniel Lawson, phone interview, March 2, 2019.

[207] Solá-Santiago, "Costume Designers Are Stars On Social Media."

[208] Mann, "It's Not TV," 108.

[209] McRobbie, *Be Creative*, 21.

According to Alice Marwick, self-branding is "an essential Web 2.0 strategy" that is "firmly instilled in modern business culture."[210] It involves applying marketing strategies to an individual and turning the self into a commodity that can be easily consumed by others. This self-brand is created and enacted through social media, which has helped bring attention to costume designers and the significance of their work. However, self-branding involves a significant amount of "emotional labor and self-surveillance to ensure an appropriate branded persona,"[211] which is challenging for costume designers who are already overworked thanks to the normalization of stress aesthetics. Nevertheless, this free labor is essentially required for freelance creatives to stand out among applicants and land a paying gig. While acknowledging its necessity, Marwick is still rightfully critical of self-branding and points out that it only guarantees success for a small number of people despite "being advocated as a universal solution to the economic downturn that can be adopted by anyone."[212] Still, it is worth noting that the type of intense self-branding that Marwick analyzes is promoted by people who see the self as "divorced from interpersonal relationships and social ties."[213] These uber-competitive businessmen focus on promoting the individual to the detriment of the collective, whereas costume designers view self-branding and individual advancement as a way to help the community. When individual costume designers demonstrate their value, it raises the status of the professional community. And if one costume designer can secure some ownership rights to their work, it opens the door for everyone who comes after them.

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[210] Marwick, *Status Update*, 164.

[211] Marwick, *Status Update*, 167.

[212] Marwick, *Status Update*, 204.

[213] Marwick, *Status Update*, 170.

Marwick notes the neoliberal tendency to apply marketing principles to the self and create a brand that is "easily consumable by potential employers." For some creatives, this involves a catchy professional title like "happiness engineer,"[214] whereas costume designers typically align their personal brand with the show they are best known for. Bryant's reputation for designing the vintage clothing for *Mad Men*, for instance, scored her a deal with retro fashion brand Unique Vintage. Costume designers like Bryant are flipping the script on Hollywood. Rather than allowing their work to exploited by IP owners, they use the IP's cache to increase their own cultural capital and secure design and promotional deals. Furthermore, having a marketable personal brand makes costume designers more valuable to IP owners, and therefore more likely to be included in licensing deals.

Dan Lawson is a brand ambassador for luxury womenswear brand Lafayette 148 New York, because they saw his work on *The Good Wife*, appreciated the unique way he was using their pieces, and reached out. As Lawson explains, "it's also not just a line or merchandising with tangible physical product. It's also when… a designer's aesthetics align with another fashion house or clothing designer." Being a brand ambassador involves traveling around the country, hosting Lafayette 148 fashion shows, and giving tips on how to style their products as well as discussing "individual style, shopping with the women," and bringing his aesthetic and experience as a costume and clothing designer to their clients.[215] Lawson's work on *The Good Wife* and *The Good Fight* enabled him to show off his personal aesthetic and brought him the cache needed to be recognized by a fashion house.

Although costume and fashion design are very different jobs, it seems that having a foot in both worlds is advantageous in the contemporary media landscape. In 2017, Lawson

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[214] Marwick, *Status Update*, 184.

[215] Daniel Lawson, phone interview, March 2, 2019.

collaborated with jewelry designer Joan Goodman, creating a 17-piece necklace collection for her brand Pono. Many of the DL for Pono pieces were worn by actors on *The Good Fight*.[216] So, Lawson was able to profit off audiences wanting to own necklaces seen on the show without having to worry about CBS getting a licensing deal and involving him in it. Similarly, *Game of Thrones* costume designer Michele Clapton teamed up with jewelry brand Yunis & Eliza to form MEY Designs, a collaborative partnership that has released two officially licensed *Game of Thrones* collections. Because MEY designs created the jewelry, then Clapton used it on the show, she "ensured a piece of the increasingly valuable and common merchandising tie-ins that come with blockbuster productions."[217] Perez was regularly approached to do tie-ins while working on *The Mindy Project*, but turned them down because he knew he would not get a cut.[218] Instead, he designed a jewelry collection for BaubleBar in 2014 and a line of winter coats for Gilt.com in 2015 that were featured on *The Mindy Project*, enabling him to profit from them rather than the IP owners.[219]

Despite Perez's confidence and apparent success at beating the system, his experiences are still fraught with contradiction, as illustrated in the following quote:

> I keep getting these letters from the studio like, "you designed this, right? You weren't copying anybody?" I'm like, "yes, I designed it." Because they plan on marketing these costumes. Even though… they won't mention me, you know. And mind you, I'm a pretty high-profile costume designer, so it's going to be hard to not mention me. But it's just not part of marketing. They don't feel it's necessary. I mean, at the same time, as costume designers, we have to be more aware of social media and branding. It's like until we are a marketable commodity, they're not going to

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[216] Rebecca Taras, "Pono partners with "The Good Fight" designer Daniel Lawson for latest jewelry collection," *Fashion Network*, March 28, 2017, https://us.fashionnetwork.com/news/Pono-partners-with-the-good-fight-designer-daniel-lawson-for-latest-jewelry-collection,809959.html.

[217] Friedlander, "'Game of Thrones' Costume Designer Says."

[218] Salvador Perez, phone interview, August 31, 2018.

[219] Friedlander, "Costume Designers Often Left Out."

> worry about us. As a costume designer, I have branded myself to the point where they know that putting my name with it helps them.[220]

Perez's statement brings up many things that have been covered in this chapter. Immediately, the issue of ignorance within the industry is illustrated in the letters from the studio asking Perez if he actually designed the costumes. It is clear that they do not understand the scope of his job. Their only motivation to clarify the origin of the costumes is to ensure they are legally covered when they decide to market them. However, Perez knows he will not be credited for his work or profit from it, since that is not how things are done and studios do not think involving the costume designer in licensing and marketing is necessary. Therefore, costume designers need to brand themselves and make themselves more marketable, so the value they can add will be undeniable. What is interesting, however, are the contradictions within his argument. He says the studio will ignore him, which is hard because he is high profile. Yet, a sentence later, he says they know it is helpful to put his name on things. These seeming contradictions can be found throughout individual interviews and across interviews. Despite the conflicting statements, they all hold some level of truth. These contradictions are a sign that we are in a transitional stage and things are changing, albeit slowly. People see that and are hopeful but also feel frustrated and helpless due to the rate of change.

This supports Caldwell's supposition that creative workers must build their own social and cultural capital through self-crediting. Underemployed and unemployed workers especially are faced with the challenge of "constantly convincing others about how and why they are artists, why their skills are exceptional even though they are not working, why they bring creative distinction and deserve employment."[221] Yet this is even true for above-the-

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[220] Salvador Perez, phone interview, August 31, 2018.

[221] Caldwell, "Stress Aesthetics," 100.

line creatives who need cultural capital for leverage in negotiations. It has become a "now-obligatory rule, that everyone in production should develop a 'personal brand' to survive."[222] Landis started calling for costume designers to pay attention to this rising trend back in 2006, when she advised CDG members to make a website and "embrace the digital age or risk becoming an anachronism."[223] Many costume designers took up the charge, especially those in younger generations, but some costume designers have no desire to perform additional labor outside of the job they signed up to do. While costume designer Deena Appel applauds those who reach out the fashion world and use their personal brand to get other work, she also acknowledges that some costume designers believe "we shouldn't be marketing what we do."[224] Nevertheless, self-branding is an unfortunate consequence of the new media landscape and can be especially useful for work-for-hire creatives like costume designers. It enables them to flip the script on IP owners and exploit the cache associated with their IP to earn the cultural and economic capital they deserve.

CONCLUSION

The swift evolution of digital technologies throughout the 2000s had a significant impact on all aspects of the media industry, affecting the way films and series were produced and consumed. Audiences came to expect transmedia franchises with narratives spread across a variety of media that contribute to a complex story world. Licensed merchandise not only offers fans entry points into this story world but provides significant ancillary profits on which some IP owners rely. However, when a costume designer's work is used for licensed products or adapted into a licensed fashion line, they rarely receive credit

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[222] Caldwell, "Stress Aesthetics," 100.

[223] Landis, "President's Letter," *The Costume Designer*, Fall 2006, 7.

[224] Deena Appel quoted in Friedlander, "Costume Designers Often Left Out."

or compensation. This is due, in part, to the long history of gender discrimination costume designers have faced, being mostly women in a male-dominated field. Gender bias has led to the devaluation of costume design and pay inequity, making it difficult for designers to advocate for additional compensation. In the fast-paced world of contemporary media production, costume designers are increasingly expected to work harder for less money and perform tasks outside their traditional job description, like appearing in promotional content or consulting on licensed products. Nevertheless, the normalization of stress aesthetics and costume designers' status as work-for-hire employees ensures that most do not see any monetary compensation from their additional labor. Furthermore, they do not have rights to any ancillary profits generated by their costume designs, which are often used by IP owners in marketing and licensed out for costumes, cosplays, and fan fashion collections. Licensing deals are complicated, and the people involved in making the deals are usually too far removed from production to understand the value costume designers can bring. This has left some costume designers feeling frustrated and looking to advocates outside the media industry, like Matchbook Company's Linda Kearns, to help raise their profiles and ensure they benefit from their labor. While merchandising issues may only affect a small number of costume designers in the course of one career, gaining appropriate credit and equitable compensation in this area will help increase the overall profile of costume designers, as it would require the industry to recognize and respect costume designers' value on each and every production.

As many costume designers will explain, their job is to create characters through clothing and provide the audience with information about the character, their state of mind, and their relationship to the narrative. Thus, they are creators with a significant role in authoring the story world. The inherently personal nature of creative labor encourages them to become invested in the projects they work on and the narratives they help create, despite

the fact that they have no legal claim over them. But creative laborers like costume designers transform raw materials and imbue part of themselves in their work, so they deserve a say in how it is used as well as a portion of the profits it generates. Furthermore, costume designers have the cache and cultural capital to increase those profits. They add value and authenticity to licensed products through name recognition and their intimate understanding of the story world. Although social media has helped raise the profile of many costume designers, they still do not have the influence to convince Hollywood that their involvement in licensing deals should be the norm. Still, it only seems fair that costume designers receive some profits for the continued use of their work and the additional labor they put into promoting it.

Although there is precedent for other creatives in the media industry to earn additional compensation for the use of their work, the Costume Designers Guild does not have the power and influence to force change in this area. Still, the CDG's ongoing battle for pay equity is a significant first step in the long-term fight for proper credit and compensation in all areas. While the CDG's pay equity committee has successfully used social media to bring more public attention to the issue, there has been little change within the media industry. The most effective advocates for change on an individual level have been directors and showrunners who see costume designers as collaborators and push for their inclusion in licensing deals. Some designers have found success in being proactive and reaching out to fashion brands rather than waiting for licensing executives to acknowledge the value costume designers can bring to fan fashion collections. Similarly, savvy costume designers have shown initiative by building their own personal brands that capitalize on the cultural capital they have earned through their association with certain media properties. In this small but significant way, costume designers flip the script and exploit the cache of a certain IP for their own personal benefit. While there is certainly underlying frustration and

impatience coming from designers and professionals on this topic, there is also a lot of hope and determination that costume designers will eventually get the respect, credit, and compensation they deserve. As Bryant says, "nothing is impossible."[225]

[225] Janie Bryant, phone interview, September 4, 2018.

CHAPTER 2: "A PIECE OF MOVIE MAGIC"

In the 2014 film adaptation of *Annie*, set in the present day, mobile phone tycoon and New York City (NYC) mayoral candidate Mr. Stacks (the new Daddy Warbucks) takes Annie and her friends to a movie premiere. A character in the film-within-the-film pulls out a Stacks Mobile phone, which an excited Mr. Stacks points out to his assistant, Grace. She replies that it cost them $500,000, turning Mr. Stacks' delight to horror. Grace matter-of-factly states, "Product placement. It's the only thing that's keeping the movie business afloat." She is not wrong, even if referring to it all as "product placement" oversimplifies the complex promotional and branding strategies that rose to prominence in the media industry throughout the 2000s.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the rise of digital technologies and social media as well as the need to stand out in a crowded marketplace shifted the way media companies approach storytelling and marketing, often forging collaborative partnerships with brands and licensees that begin during pre-production. Film and television producers rely on transmedia content and licensed merchandise to connect with viewers, promote their IP, and make up for profit losses due to lower theater attendance and a diffused audience overwhelmed by content. While these tactics may not be new, they have been heightened and normalized in the contemporary media industry. As a result, the 2010s brought renewed importance to licensed fashion tie-ins as a promotional strategy and form of brand extension. While the last chapter focused on how and why costume designers are often excluded from licensing deals, this chapter looks at what happens when a costume designer is involved in adapting their own costume designs into fashion. By taking a close look at one particular case—the *Annie* for Target collection—I will explore the experiences of producing and consuming licensed fan fashion and consider how meaning and value are imbued in the clothes by the costume designer, the retailer, and the consumer.

In this sense, my approach in this chapter aligns with Jonathan Gray's analysis of paratexts in *Show Sold Separately*. As discussed in the Introduction chapter, Gray's book focuses on all of the promotions and ancillary material surrounding a film or television show, referred to as "paratexts." His goal is to study how these paratexts, which are often dismissed as mere hype, create meaning while affecting "our understanding of and relationship with the film or television show."[1] Similarly, I evaluate the *Annie* for Target fan fashion collection as a paratext and consider how it provides an entryway into the story world, creates a tangible connection to the characters, and allows viewers to extend the film into their everyday lives. Furthermore, I assess how the promotional materials surrounding the fashion collection operate as paratexts themselves, analyzing how they frame the collection and encourage consumers to understand and interact with it. Throughout the chapter, I also consider "Annie"'s long history as a heritage brand and the importance of nostalgia in the production, marketing, and consumption of the collection.

My argument draws on a personal interview I conducted with costume designer Renee Ehrlich Kalfus, who also designed the Target collection and provided insight into her process and how a career costume designer adapts to the considerations of fashion design. Paratexts, such as advertising and marketing materials released by Target and *Annie* for Target consumer reactions gathered from social media pages, YouTube videos, and blogs, provide context and information on the film's reception. Much of the Internet content is branded with the hashtag #AnnieforTarget. My primary source for evidence of how consumers engage with fan fashion is a fan-made "Annie Review" video created and posted by YouTube user CreativePrincess2012, which follows Lexie and Sydney from the webseries "Real Live Monster High" as they watch the new *Annie* film and shop the Target collection.

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[1] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 4.

The video provides a clear example of the several factors at play in this collaboration, mainly: the convergence of costume and fashion, expectations regarding remakes and the treatment of icons, negotiating personal and branded identities, parasocial relationships between audiences and fictional characters, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, and the issue of race and representation. Further, the video reveals the need to disentangle a perceived consumer from an actual consumer and complicates the question of the perceived fan based on who is actually creating and sharing fan content. Through an analysis of these paratextual materials, I aim to provide a better understanding of the process of costume adaptation and how both producers and consumers engage with film through clothing.

UPDATING A CLASSIC

In order to understand how the *Annie* for Target licensed fan fashion collection operates as a paratext, we must first consider the film on which it is based. Moreover, Gray would argue that the 2014 *Annie* film itself should be analyzed as a paratext, since "it is seen as an outgrowth of another show, as an extension that is functionally subservient and dependent."[2] Despite director Will Gluck's desire to bring the story wholly into the present, the film is still framed as an adaptation of the musical and thereby inseparable from it. In fact, "Annie" is a transmedia franchise that has existed since the 1920s with roots going back even further.[3]

Although many scholars (including myself) fall into the trap of framing transmedia franchises as a consequence of the rise of digital technologies, it would be more accurate to say that we witnessed an explosion of interest in long-existing practices. Avi Santo's deep dive into the history of Lone Ranger licensing shows that "IP was both extended and

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[2] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 118.

[3] Throughout this chapter, I will use "Annie" to refer to the IP or brand, Annie to refer to the character, and *Annie* to refer to the title of the musical or film adaptations.

coordinated across media and merchandising platforms long before conglomeration and convergence became industry buzzwords."[4] Indeed, the "Annie" brand has a long history with wearable merchandise tie-ins as well. In the 1930s, a *Radio Orphan Annie* episode dedicated half of its program to "describing the grandeur of a ring Daddy Warbucks has given Annie for her birthday while offering children the opportunity to 'get a ring just like Annie's' in exchange for ten cents and an Ovaltine box top." Santo goes on to describe how the reference to Ovaltine is subtle and indirect: "the birthday ring is presented as an opportunity to become part of Annie's inner circle of friends."[5] Throughout this chapter, I will show how the *Annie* for Target collection was similarly presented as a way to engage directly with the characters and story world.

When people think of "Annie," they usually think of the Broadway musical that opened in 1977 or the 1982 film adaptation (Theoni V. Aldredge designed the costumes for both). However, this is merely a situation in which a paratext "slid past" the source of the IP and became the primary text.[6] The Broadway musical and subsequent film adaptations were based on Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie* comic strip, which was in turn based on James Whitcomb Riley's 1885 poem by the same name. Gray's comic strip ran in the *Chicago Tribune* from 1924 until 2010 and has been adapted into a radio program, three stage musicals, several films, and a variety of licensed merchandise. So, the 2014 movie musical *Annie* carried with it a ninety-year history of "Annie" as an intellectual property that was key to the film's production, marketing, and consumption.

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[4] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*, 6.

[5] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*, 44.

[6] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 176.

This latest version of the story brings *Annie* into the present-day, abandoning the 1930s setting of the 1977 Broadway musical and previous film adaptations. Nevertheless, the parallels between the two time periods enable the same themes of class, consumerism, and upward mobility to be explored, with the original story taking place during the Great Depression and the updated version occurring shortly after the Great Recession. Both are about an underprivileged girl who dreams of finding the parents who abandoned her and bettering her circumstances, but the details of the narrative and how it plays out were changed to align with modern times. For example, Annie is first invited to dine with Mr. Stacks after a video of him saving her life goes viral on social media.

Gluck was adamant about bringing the new *Annie* into the present and not being held down by past representations. Still, he, Kalfus, choreographer Zachary Woodlee, and everyone else involved in the film understood and appreciated the complications of creating "an updated version of this iconic story" and struggled with that visually.[7] How does one re-imagine something that is burned into the collective memory? The title *Annie* already evokes certain images for the audience and leads them to bring a specific set of expectations based on their previous experience to their initial viewing. If the film conflicts with those expectations, it runs the risk of disappointing the viewer. Kalfus likened it to changing the Thanksgiving meal: "Everyone is mad at you, because they really want the traditional meal. It's like—you don't mess with that. But you need to push the envelope." Her meaning in relation to remaking the film is plain: fans of the stage musical and 1982 *Annie* film associate a certain set of images and emotions with it. Santo has argued that heritage brands "pose complex managerial challenges because of their need to consistently strike the right

[7] Renee Ehrlich Kalfus, interview, February 25, 2015.

balance between nostalgia and innovation."[8] By changing the set of signs that make up the "Annie" brand, the filmmakers destabilize its position within popular culture and dismiss the traditional reverence for cultural icons in a way that may upset fans. Even if the filmmakers are willing to move the story entirely into the present and take a fresh perspective, some fans may not be mentally prepared to see "Annie" canon toyed with. For that reason, the filmmakers expected a certain amount of backlash.

Not only do audiences bring certain expectations to their viewing of an adaptation, the media industry encourages and capitalizes on this nostalgic connection through marketing. Therefore, it can be even more disappointing to see something that does not align with your memories. Santo discusses how market research experts have advocated for "the emergence of heritage brands and retro branding strategies" since the late 1990s, expecting the longevity of the IP and its reputation to help content stand out in an increasingly crowded marketplace.[9] Children's heritage brands in particular "are often promoted as offering gateways for parents to reexperience their own childhoods—or the childhoods they imagined others had—alongside their kids."[10] Thus, it is especially important in those cases to find the proper balance of nostalgia and newness. In fact, Paul Booth suggests that for any text to "engage a fannish audience," it should be "both familiar and novel at once."[11] Gluck plays with adult viewers' nostalgic expectations in the film's opening shot, which features a girl who epitomizes "Annie" with her red curly hair, fair skin, freckles, floral dress with a peter pan collar, and knit cardigan. She is bubbly and theatrical

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[8] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*, 191.

[9] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*, 155.

[10] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*, 155.

[11] Booth, *Playing Fans*, 6.

as she delivers her class presentation, just as we expect Annie to be. However, she soon takes her seat and "Annie B." (for Bennett) is called up to give her presentation, and it becomes clear that she is the Annie from the title. With this opening scene, Gluck pays homage to the enduring "Annie" brand and audience expectations while also making it apparent that the film will be toying with them.

Pop star Sia and record producer Greg Kurstin updated the music and lyrics for the original *Annie* songs in addition to collaborating on three new songs: "Opportunity," "Who Am I," and "Moonquake Lake." Although most of the original songs remain, "I Think I'm Gonna Like It Here," "You're Never Fully Dressed Without a Smile," and "Little Girls" sound quite different with their updated arrangements. David Rooney of *The Hollywood Reporter* did not mince words in his review, saying most of the songs had been "shredded" and were drowning in "desperately hip polyrhythmic sounds, aurally assaultive arrangements and inane new lyrics."[12] The hip-hop update is unsurprising given that the film was produced by Will Smith's Overbrook Entertainment and Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter's Marcy Media Films (as well as Columbia Pictures and Will Gluck's Olive Bridge Entertainment). While Smith and Carter have branched out throughout their careers, both got their start as rappers. In keeping with the synergistic practices of contemporary Hollywood, the soundtrack was produced by RCA, which is owned by Sony (who distributed the film) and Carter's label RocNation. Especially considering Carter's 1998 hit "It's the Hard Knock Life" that sampled the original Broadway *Annie* song of the same title, Rooney and others had much higher standards for an updated *Annie* soundtrack. In fact, Carter was originally slated to update the music but ended up not doing it for reasons that were not reported on in the press.

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[12] David Rooney, "'Annie': Film Review," *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 14, 2014, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/annie-film-review-757491/.

The tone of the film is updated as well, in keeping with the style of contemporary comedies and musicals. As demonstrated in the scene described at the beginning of this chapter, *Annie* is self-aware and unafraid to comment on the contemporary media industry. A couple scenes later, after the premiere, Stacks and Grace gush about the movie and their theories about the characters' fates to Annie and her friends, who assure them that some characters return in the next movie. "There's a next movie?!" Stacks and Grace exclaim, only to be told there are four more movies in an offhand manner that emphasizes how typical media franchises are for the current generation. These moments of self-reflexivity and the narrative's reliance on social media situate the film firmly in the present day. At the same time that it seemingly pokes fun at the media industry's reliance on reusing IP, the film encourages audiences to expect sequels and the continuation of media franchises over time and across platforms.

The decision to update the songs and story led to varying degrees of response regarding the film, with detractors claiming that it ruined the original (despite many of them not actually having seen it). Criticisms by purist fans led to several long exchanges in Facebook comment threads and IMDB review sections. One Facebook user asserts that she has not seen the new film, but has no desire to see it based on the commercial: "From what I've seen they changed way to much to be considered 'Annie' they should have gave it another name!!!" Although her comment received some "likes," the comments defending the remake received more support than those critiquing it. As one Facebook user pointed out in response to the above comment, "sometimes different is good." Many of these discussions occurred before the film was released, supporting Jonathan Gray's point that IMDB and similar discussion boards "become some of the key paratexts through while many of these

intertexts, links, and preferences are offered to the public."[13] These online fan discussions are especially useful for scholars, since they offer a "minute-by-minute register of how meanings are circulated, how the text is being interpreted, which intertexts are invoked, and… how various paratexts are being discussed and activated."[14] It was clear from these discussions that the musical paratexts/intertexts of "Annie" were the ones being invoked by prospective audiences as guidelines for what the new film should be like. Santo points out how brand loyalists are key to a brand's success, but they are also the most resistant to change.[15]

The most widely-discussed update to the film was its multicultural ensemble, especially the casting of Black actress Quvenzhané Wallis in the title role.[16] The film was originally meant as a vehicle for Smith's daughter Willow, but she aged out of the role by the time it went into production. Wallis made history in 2013 when she was nominated for an Academy Award for her performance in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), becoming the youngest person ever nominated for Best Actress. She also had a role in *12 Years a Slave* (2013), which was a critical success and won the Oscar for Best Picture along with several other awards.[17] So, despite her limited experience, Wallis's credits lent her a certain amount of status that should have transferred to *Annie*. And as an up-and-coming actress the correct age for the role, the casting made sense. Furthermore, remakes in this era often featured more diverse casts than their predecessors, largely in response to audiences'

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[13] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 130.

[14] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 137.

[15] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*, 156.

[16] Saturday Night Live did a skit picturing what "Black Annie" would be like when Cameron Diaz, who played Miss Hannigan in the film, hosted SNL on November 22, 2014.

[17] The film has a 95% on *Rotten Tomatoes* based on 380 critical reviews.

repeated pushes for better media representation as well as the expectation of realism (relative to the film's genre).[18] Social media has become "an effective tool of resistance" for those challenging poor and/or inaccurate representation of Black-Americans in media.[19]

Nevertheless, the "Annie" IP is so strongly associated with pale skin, freckles, and curly red hair that this change was seen as a huge departure from the original and led to heated debates on social media regarding the sanctity of "classics." Racist detractors felt that "Annie" was the property of so-called "white culture": "There are cultures that need to be protected and black people claim to be all about their culture…. Get the hell of white culture and masterpieces and come up with your own." While there was some support for these viewpoints, most commenters on Facebook and IMDB were quick to shut down the bigots and frame the change as something positive: "I think something very right and good was done when we proved to children that Annie can be any race." Audiences seemed to agree, as the film was a popular success despite being panned by critics. Although most of these online exchanges took place between adults, the second commenter cuts to the truth—this movie is for kids and about kids. Most kids did not have that nostalgic attachment to earlier versions of Annie that their parents had and were more interested in the character than her appearance. In a thread debating the legitimacy of the remake, one woman commented that her youngest daughter has not seen the original *Annie* (referring to the 1982 movie musical) but loves the new one and replays it several times a day. Barnett and Flynn assert that most of the media we consume is "an amalgam of popular tastes and desires and the understanding of media professionals… who were and are also consumers of

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[18] See, for example: Rawan Elbaba, "Why on-screen representation matters, according to these teens," *PBS News Hour*, November 14, 2019, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/why-on-screen-representation-matters-according-to-these-teens.

[19] Marlo Barnett and Joseph E. Flynn, "A Century of Celebration: Disrupting Stereotypes and Portrayals of African Americans in the Media," *Black History Bulletin* 77, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 28.

these images – many that are, as the relate to African Americans, wholly negative."[20] In this sense, the issue of representation in Hollywood is cyclical. The media industry is run largely by the older generation who grew up on racist media imagery influenced by cultural norms of the time. They internalized those stereotypes and now reinforce them through business practices, hiring, and casting. For the most part, young consumers have not yet been indoctrinated by these images and are consequently much more open to the diversification of heritage characters.

Although children are the presumed target demographic of the film and clothing collection, their parents are the ones with the buying power, means of transportation, and connection to the original Annie stories. So, the film's marketing attempted to present Annie as something new and exciting for kids while capitalizing on parents' nostalgia. The trailer appeals to both audiences by keeping all references to previous incarnations of the "Annie" IP subtle. There are no explicit references to the film being a remake or adaptation of the stage musical, yet the connection is obvious to anyone familiar with them when "Hard Knock Life" starts playing a few seconds into the trailer. It is worth noting that although one version of the trailer has the updated version of "Smile" playing quietly in the background at one point, the clips of the songs featured are the parts that sound most similar to the originals. This reassures parents that despite the updates to the aesthetic and the story, this is still the "Annie" they know and love. At the same time, by presenting the film as something original and current, it draws in children. Gray theorizes that adults who bought *Star Wars* toys for their kids were trying to give the gift of "their own nostalgically remembered relationship with the text that came at least in part from the toys."[21] In the

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[20] Barnett and Flynn, "A Century of Celebration," 28.

[21] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 185.

same way, parents took their children to see *Annie* and shop the Target collection as a way to offer their kids the same connection to the "Annie" brand that they had growing up.

The partnership with Target was an effective way to market a kids' movie to parents. According to Kalfus, Sony pictures had a pre-existing deal with Target to create a product line for girls, and the costume designs for *Annie* fit well with their goals. Target regularly releases collaborations with fashion designers in their women's clothing department, like Missoni, Rodarte, and Alexander McQueen, and is no stranger to media partnerships. The retail giant had a strong relationship with The CW's *Jane the Virgin* (2014-2019), which involved integrating its brand slowly and organically into the characters' lives by working with the show's producers. This aligns with the "new" types of partnerships that have emerged since the 2000s in which sponsors go beyond advertising their products to branding the content.[22] Target's Vice President of Media Strategy Stevie Benjamin noted that fans showed their support for the partnership on social media and how beneficial it was for the company.[23] Target also offers exclusive toys for media franchises like Marvel and DC that are only available in their stores or on their website. Santo notes how "powerful retailers like Target and Walmart" are in "positions of authority able to influence licensor decisions over product extensions and licensee partnerships."[24] These previous successful deals with media franchises may have encouraged them to produce the *Annie* for Target line, which was the Target's first collaboration with a costume designer and their first design collaboration aimed at children. They have since released another children's fan fashion

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[22] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 87.

[23] Jennifer Yepez, "Bullseye Branding: How Target Fell in Love With Jane the Virgin," *Brand Channel*, April 30, 2015.

[24] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*, 217.

collection in collaboration with costume designer Jacqueline Durran based on her designs for the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* (2017).

WHEN COSTUME AND FASHION CONVERGE

While it is exciting for costume designers to have some control over their IP and be able to profit from it, the nature of licensed fan fashion collections as promotional paratexts requires that they be released prior to the film. The marketing for these collections doubles as marketing for the film, as does the social media buzz created by bloggers, influencers, and regular people posting about their excitement or sharing photos of them wearing fan fashion. Especially in the case of a heritage brand like Annie, the collection helped prep young consumers for the film. So, if a costume designer wants to be involved in designing a licensed fan fashion collection, they usually have to juggle two jobs at once. As mentioned in the Introduction, creative laborers must "shape and refashion their identities" as they navigate industries undergoing major technological and economic transitions.[25] For costume designers in the contemporary media industry, this can mean learning to moving fluidly between the identities of costume designer and fashion designer, which each require a different mentality, viewpoint, and approach. Licensed fan fashion collections reveal an interesting convergence of costume and fashion, fantasy and reality. This section explores how the experience of adapting costumes into fashion requires costume designers to negotiate seemingly competing identities while fulfilling the distinctly different roles of costume and fashion designer and adopting a sort of hybridized identity.

COSTUME VS. FASHION

In our interview, Kalfus described her experience working on the film and the fashion collection as "a really interesting confluence" of two very different things: "It's not

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[25] Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell, *Production Studies*, 4.

like I'm a kids' designer. I'm a costume designer." Like most other costume designers, she considers her profession an entirely separate practice from fashion design. Costume is most commonly used to mean garments worn by a character in a performance. They should have visual interest but always at the service of character and story. Screen costume is meant to reflect the personality and interiority of the character as well as their place within the narrative at any given time. Every detail from the pattern of wrinkles on a shirt to the number of buttons left undone provides information about the characters, their mental states, and the subtext of the scene. Deborah Nadoolman Landis argues that costume is "the concrete manifestation of the character's self-image" and is meant to "disappear" into the narrative.[26] In other words, costumes are the externalization of a character's interiority and should serve the film's specific narrative and visual style. Therefore, costume designers do not necessarily choose clothing that is on-trend, unless it suits the character's personality and the director's vision. Rather, they select certain garments because of the meanings associated with them. Their purpose is to help create and communicate a character. As Landis explains, the designer's choices are "based upon what the character's choice would be in their own life… For the film to work the audience must be able to say, absolutely, 'I recognize that person.'"[27] This ensures that the costume is accurately communicating the character's identity to the audience. Miranda J. Banks argues that one of the three main issues costume designers face is distinguishing their work from fashion.[28]

Fashion suggests a system involving the design, production, and distribution of clothes that are deemed acceptable by a brand or whichever dominant group of tastemakers

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[26] Landis, *Dressed: A Century of Hollywood Costume Design,* xvii; xxi.

[27] Landis, *Filmcraft: Costume Design*, 9-10.

[28] Banks, "Gender Below-the-Line," 90.

is in power at the given moment. It can certainly be an art form—fashion is often aesthetically interesting, thought provoking, complex, and expressive of the creator's interiority—but it is also about corporations struggling for dominance in a capitalist system by creating then fulfilling consumers' desires. In the end, the goal of retail fashion companies like Target is to appeal to a large group of consumers and create revenue. As Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson explain, "fashion's fundamental dilemma is that is has inevitably been predicated upon change, obsolescence, adornment and, in the so-called First World, it has been inextricably bound up with the commercial."[29] It is trend-based and meant to appeal to potential consumers, unlike costume design, which is story-based and meant to represent a character visually. Costume designers are not free of commercial ties, but their work rarely stands on its own. Their success is more likely to be measured by how well their designs complement the film than by how marketable they are (at least in the past). In other words, costume begins and ends with the character but is shaped by assumptions and standards held by the audience to ensure that they reach the desired interpretation. Fashion begins and ends with the consumer and is shaped by brand identity and standards that the complex hegemonic structure has helped to normalize and maintain as the beauty ideal.

It is a common misconception among the uninitiated that it is all the same. According to Miranda Banks, this conflation of fashion and costume is "critical to their [costume designers'] invisibility in the production process and in the press."[30] As a costume designer, I am often taken aback by the amateur director's surprise that we cannot compensate for lack of budget by having actors arbitrarily fill in missing pieces with their

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[29] Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson, *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explanation and Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.

[30] Banks, "Gender Below-the-Line," 94.

own clothes. After all, regardless of the terminology used, it all refers to material objects designed to be worn or displayed on the body. But "conflating the work of [costume] design with fashion seems to imply that clothes… have the same purpose and meaning."[31] In fact, costume and fashion function quite differently in the ideologies they represent and produce as well as the way in which they are consumed. Characters are typically not based on actors, and it is unlikely that an actor's clothes will fit them exactly as a character's clothes should. Costume begins and ends with the character but is shaped by assumptions and standards held by the audience to ensure that the correct messages are being communicated. Fashion begins and ends with the consumer and is shaped by standards that the complex hegemonic structure has helped to normalize and maintain as the beauty ideal.

As Kalfus self-theorizes, a costume designer should be "an expert in explaining who you are" through clothing. Kalfus is aware of the struggle most people face with self-presentation and the uncertainty they feel over how to express themselves through clothing—"many people are very confused and very intimidated," so it helps to feel validated by somebody whose profession is creating images. Fashion design, though, is "a whole other ball game" when it comes to the process and motivations behind the designs. So, even though several of the fashions from the Target collection and the costumes from the *Annie* film look the same, they were influenced by different considerations and required Kalfus to simultaneously occupy two different design mentalities.

DESIGNING FOR CHARACTERS

Costume designers have argued that contemporary costume design is more difficult than designing a historical film. They may be experts on explaining characters through clothing signifiers, but audiences also see themselves as "expert[s] on contemporary

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[31] Banks, "Gender Below-the-Line," 95.

clothes."[32] Viewers interact daily with the clothing signifiers presented onscreen and are familiar with their unmediated meanings. The designer must walk a fine line between using recognizable signifiers to convey character information and becoming too stereotyped in their costuming, therefore alienating the audience from the immersive possibilities of the screen text. The considerations of contemporary costume design came full circle in this collaboration. Although most costume designers take it for granted, the average person is unaware that costumes for films set in the present are still heavily researched.

For the *Annie* film costumes, the design process was based on what kids like, what the characters would have access to, and the requirements of the film's genre. Kalfus found inspiration for her costume designs by observing and interacting with kids in their natural environments. It came down to "knowing friends' kids and interviewing a lot of 10 to 14-year-olds about what they like." The ideas came from these "kids on the street" and were interpreted by the designer as she created looks for Annie and the other kids in the film. Kalfus put character first, imagining where Annie and the other foster kids would get their clothes and how they might go about self-styling: "I did a very mix-and-matched thing. I figured that, nowadays, foster kids would get great hand-me-downs and that kids would fight over it." Indeed, when Annie attends the movie premiere in the film, a reporter asks the stereotypical question, "Who are you wearing?" In reply, Annie proceeds to list the friends from whom she borrowed her clothes or where she found each piece was wearing. Those are the types of narrative elements that factor into a costume designer's process and from the subtext behind what appears to simply be a "normal" outfit.

Kalfus's costume shop performed a lot of aging, dyeing, fraying, and altering, to create "re-purposed and re-appropriated clothes… ripped and then sewn and patched" to

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[32] Landis, *Filmcraft: Costume Design*, 10.

make the clothes feel "used and worn and beloved." Additionally, they had to consider the unique requirements of the musical genre, since actors in a musical are often dancing and running around in their clothes. The costumes had to be practical, comfortable, and allow for full range of movement. All of these considerations for the costumes resulted in a lot of layering, pattern-mixing, and knit fabrics that carried over into the Target collection as a variety of complementary, easy-to-wear separates.

As discussed in the previous section, there are certain expectations and symbols that audiences associate with heritage brands. This tendency is not reserved for fans but can be found within the media industry as well. For Kalfus, this attempt to reference past versions of Annie while still bringing something new to it was embodied in Annie's iconic red dress. Kalfus had expected to create several versions of the dress, since there were many creatives, producers, and executives who were likely to have some opinions on how it should look. There was "so much pressure on that red dress to begin with." She recounted the big show-and-tell meeting with the producers and Sony executives where she unveiled the red dress design and "oohs" and "ahs" spread across the room. Kalfus was undeniably proud that everyone was happy with the original dress design: "They really loved this dress from the beginning. And it's like—every once in a while you have that in a design, where people really respond to it." The iconic status of Annie's red dress is so strong that it produced a visceral reaction from those who saw it unveiled. Everyone felt that it captured the balance of nostalgia and novelty that audiences desired.

DESIGNING FOR CONSUMERS

In Angela McRobbie's work on fashion designers, she notes a contradiction between a romantic self "led by inspiration, ideas, intuition and dreams" and the designers' practical side, which knew that the end goal was to sell the clothes and, in some cases, their selves as

a brand.[33] Despite this desire to infuse the personal into the professional, costume and fashion designers usually do not have free rein over their work—they are always working under a larger brand identity set by the film directors, producers, and studio or the fashion brand for which they are designing. As Kalfus said, "your design comes from wanting to do what you think you love or you want to bring to the table." But, throughout the process, she had to temper these wishes with the practicalities of designing retail fashion. Cultural products like fan fashion thereby serve as "sites of struggle, contestation, and negotiation between a broad range of stakeholders"[34] and require the negotiation of the producer's, brand's, and consumer's interests. While costume and fashion design are alike in this way, the types of outside forces differ between the two. Having no previous fashion design experience, Kalfus was unsure what to expect from the partnership with Target and "learned a lot about retail" throughout the process. During the process of simultaneously designing the film costumes and fashion collection, Kalfus learned to oscillate back and forth between the two roles—tempering her costume designer impulses with the considerations of fashion design and adjusting to working within the requirements set by Target's brand identity and overall business plan.

The fashion collection, released on November 16, 2014 before the film's release on December 19, offered viewers an entry point into the *Annie* story world that extended beyond the ephemeral experience of watching a film. The 25-piece collection was inspired by the film's costumes and featured an array of girls' fashion items and accessories, including a DIY kit for personalizing shoes and other clothing items. Kalfus wanted to "bring the different characters to the line," which she knew was unusual for a fashion line,

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[33] Angela McRobbie, "Fashion as a Culture Industry," in *Fashion Cultures*, ed by Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson (London: Routledge, 2000), 259.

[34] Holt and Perren, *Media Industries*, 5.

but Target "really loved that." It was one way in which Kalfus negotiated her identity as a costume designer with her temporary role as a fashion designer—infusing the basis of costume design (character) into the fashion collection. For both the film costumes and fashion line, Kalfus "didn't want to pander" to the children and instead created "sophisticated items in kids' sizes" that caught the eye of adult Target shoppers as well. From there, her fashions ended up back in the hands of the kids who inspired the original costumes. The Target collaboration provided a space for the considerations of costume and fashion design to come together with Kalfus' personal design philosophy.

One of the things that Kalfus learned from her experience on the film is that children just "want to be comfortable. They want it to be a little… glittery and fun." Once she was forced to think beyond the characters to kids more generally, she realized that kids really "want to express themselves." She believes that the best time to encourage the creative use of clothing is when kids are young. Through the mix-and-match separates, accessories, and DIY kit included in the collection, Kalfus hoped to provide kids with the tools to be their own costume designer and express their own character through clothing. Kalfus's approach worked, and the Target collection sold out within a couple of weeks. As argued in the last chapter, licensed fan fashion collections run the risk of mediocrity when they do not involve the costume designer, because the costumes are then adapted by someone who may not understand their original meaning and value. In those cases, their translations will fall short. The industry is becoming more aware of the importance of presenting a cohesive transmedia brand but typically only looks to above-the-line creatives. Since costume designers are seen as below-the-line "technicians," their value in maintaining the brand's aesthetic across ancillary products is often overlooked. Kalfus's involvement in the *Annie* for Target collection and its success despite the film's poor reception shows how involving the costume designer benefits all involved.

Since many of Kalfus's costume designs were intricate and involved unique materials sourced from New York's Garment District, she thought she would have to lower her expectations for the Target collection and was pleasantly surprised to find that was not the case. Target wanted to collaborate with Kalfus "in a very respectful way" and "were really into doing the designs." They showed Kalfus fabrics and trims, making sure that she approved every part of the collection. However, Target had the final say about which costume designs ultimately became part of the fashion collection. Big box retailers like Target "are increasingly capable of exercising tremendous influence over how character brands are extended simply by virtue of standardized floor plans and consumer profiling."[35] Their wide product range and consequent knowledge of consumer preferences makes them an authority on how to use IP in a way that benefits the licensor as well as Target.

Kalfus was the designer of the collection; her name was on the label. She had some creative freedom and Target was respectful of her decisions, but she still had to operate within the confines of the Target brand in a way that benefitted their corporate goals. Just as the costume designs were shaped by the demands of character and narrative, the fashion collection was influenced by the context in which it would be presented. The *Annie* for Target collection was given "real estate" at Target stores, which means that a portion of the sales floor is reserved for a specific type of item or product line. It is part of the systematic strategy behind the arrangement and display of merchandise in a store that is meant to maximize sales. As Kalfus explains, "they have to actually show it to sell it."

Kalfus wanted to have a hooded sweatshirt in the Target collection, since Annie spends most of the film wearing one, but Target rejected the design on the grounds that they already had several hoodies available on their sales floor. So, Kalfus was "steered towards

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[35] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*, 218.

what would work in the whole store, and that's where they had something to say." Kalfus's creative freedom only stretched as far as it was profitable for Target and made sense with their brand. Kalfus also "really wanted to do boots and sneakers, because sneakers are gigantic," and hoped to include pens in the DIY kit to write on the sneakers. But Target said it was not possible, since sneakers cannot hang in the clothing section and are sold in a separate section of their store. Kalfus was "very disappointed with that," because she had "several ideas to show them for that and thought that that would, of course, make the whole thing." In these cases, Kalfus had to mediate her costume designer interest in character and her personal interest in creative self-expression with her role as a fashion designer subject to a larger brand identity and corporate goals. Once the costume designs had been appropriated and reshaped to fit the Target brand, they became commodities available for purchase and ownership by fans.

Costume designers design to suit the needs of characters, whereas fashion designers design to the suit the needs of consumers. So, Kalfus admits that she "hadn't really given a lot of thought other than to… the costume portion of what kids want or like." Being a costume designer, she was initially focused solely on the clothes and "was just not thinking about it in terms of how it would sell." So, she was pleasantly surprised to find how rewarding the experience was, "that [she] could make something for a mass retail that was clever and good-looking at that people liked." By the end of the process, Kalfus was comfortably switching between and negotiating her opposing identities, even leaning into her role as fashion designer. She recalls how she "started thinking like a retailer" and envisioning how to market the collection to potential consumers. She suggested that they give the kids "a piece of movie magic," implying the importance of making the kids feel like they could access the fantasy world of Annie through the Target collection. Target loved the idea and featured the quote from Kalfus on the hangtags.

NEGOTIATING FOR CREDIT & COMPENSATION

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Kalfus's *Annie* for Target was released in advance of the film to help promote it, requiring her to design the costumes and fashions simultaneously. In the moment, Kalfus was so engrossed in her work that she did not notice how overwhelming it was to balance two full-time jobs. It was only when she looked back that she wondered how she managed it all and realized she had little desire to repeat the experience. Despite all the additional labor expected of Kalfus, credit and compensation were not handed to her. She and her agent fought the "behind-the-scene battle" that so many other costume designers find themselves fighting due to lack of precedent: "it's a hard thing to fight for, and it's a hard thing to try to establish." However, after years of working in an industry that constantly undervalues those in her profession, where "everybody wants to say no to you, for everything," Kalfus was ready to fight for recognition. She knew she had a right to be credited and compensated for the clothing she designed—quite a departure from a costume designer's requirement to cede ownership of their designs: "Because of course they didn't want me to have any money. Why should I design something and get paid for it, if they can just get us to give it to them for free?"

Thankfully, her battle resulted in apparently amiable negotiations with Sony and Target. With the help of her agent and the support of Will Gluck and James Lassiter from Overbrook Entertainment, Kalfus secured a consulting fee for her work and her name on the hangtag. As discussed in the previous chapter, people higher-up in the production hierarchy can use their power to bring the costume designer into the deal, which was a large part of why this partnership happened. Kalfus did, however, have to show precedent for a designer receiving credit in a similar collaboration. She reminded Sony of the collaboration between H&M and costume designer Trish Summerville of the Sony-produced *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* that aligned with the film's release in December 2011. Summerville received media

attention for the collaboration as well as credit on the fashion line's hangtag, which Kalfus brought to a meeting as physical evidence. These are the types of situations that cause costume designers to feel hopeful about gaining more respect in the future, but discouraged by how hard they still have to work to receive the most basic levels of credit and compensation.

FRAMING THE FASHION

Gray argues that paratexts work like advertisements, selling products "by creating brand identity and promising value-added."[36] The promotional material, or paratexts, surrounding the *Annie* for Target collection positioned the clothing as a way to tangibly connect with the characters and story world. As mentioned above, Target included a quote from Kalfus on the hangtags for the collection: "I want each girl to be able to own a piece of movie magic." According to Roland Barthes' concept of written-clothing mentioned in the Introduction chapter, written descriptions accompanying clothing essentially perform the function of paratexts by framing the garments as possessing a specific meaning and value.[37] Thus, the words on the hangtag told consumers exactly how they were to understand the objects presented to them—as a material piece of Hollywood and an alternate method for consuming the text. This idea that the ephemeral film can be made tangible in an object is what enables the success of fan fashion collections. Kalfus also understood that people want more than just the temporal experience of viewing; they want a physical, long-lasting connection that brings the fantastic into the everyday. The hangtag is just one paratext that helped assign meaning and value to the collection. This section discusses how Target's marketing campaign helped define the collection by emphasizing Kalfus as author/creator,

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[36] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 27.

[37] Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 16.

reaching out to mommy bloggers, and (somewhat unsuccessfully) attempting to maintain the film's diverse representation in their ads.

KALFUS AS "AUTHOR"

Even though costume design serves the needs of character and narrative, and fashion design is aimed at attracting and maintaining consumers, there is often a personal element to design that should be taken into account. Characters and consumers are not pre-existing entities. They are created from the perspective of the designer. The designer's specific viewpoint determines which signifiers from a seemingly infinite number of possible signs are used to convey a specific message. This unique perspective is what they bring to licensing deals, making the products more authentically tied to the story world. At the 2011 "Transmedia, Hollywood 2: Visual Culture and Design" symposium, hosted by Denise Mann and Henry Jenkins, Avi Santo was on a panel with industry professionals including Matt Wolf, game designer and founder of media and entertainment company Double Twenty Productions. According to Santo, Wolf acknowledged that it is challenging for one person to manage every aspect of creative development but argued that there needs to be some cohesion, since "consumers would quickly recognize materials not subjected to creative oversight as inauthentic."[38] The same holds for fan fashion collections, which is why it helps to involve the costume designer. As described in the previous section, Kalfus was able to take the inspiration she used for the costumes and adapt it for the context of fashion, enabling her to stay true to the spirit of the original costumes and characters in a way that another designer could not. Santo argues that corporate authors' claims to authority are "contingent upon their professed ability to translate a property's value across product lines

[38] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*, 152.

and shifting production conventions."[39] However, many corporations seem to be missing the key role costume designers play in translating the IP's value into fashion.

Renee Ehrlich Kalfus herself serves as a paratext of the *Annie* for Target collection, with her status as the film's costume designer and experience designing over thirty-four feature films providing meaning and value to the fashion line. Because film costumes are ultimately the result of a collaborative effort between the director, the costume designer, and the rest of the costume department, Kalfus is technically not their sole author. Nevertheless, she serves the "author-function" as described by Michel Foucault. Foucault argues that "an author's name is not simply an element in a discourse" but serves the function of classification, in part by grouping specific texts together, thereby establishing a certain type of relationship among them and differentiating them from other texts.[40] The author-function presumes that the meaning and value of a text is dependent on where it comes from, who wrote it, their motivations, and the context in which it was created.[41] In this sense, the author functions as a paratext and can often lend a certain amount of status to the text. Gray points out how the seemingly endless amount of paratexts created to promote a film or television show can "contribute to the clutter that often bothers many a would-be audience member, thereby devaluing the show and losing would-be audiences with their mere presence."[42] The inclusion of the costume designer in a licensed fan fashion collection adds prestige and separates those licensed products from the rest of the hype and clutter.

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[39] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*, 142.

[40] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Textual Strategies: Perspective in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. by Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 147.

[41] Foucault, "What is an Author?," 149.

[42] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 82.

Target capitalized on Kalfus's author-function and used her to promote the collection. She spoke fondly in our interview of her experience and how validating it was to be put front-and-center to promote the collection: "They threw a very serious launch party… and that was all about me, which was—it's, you know, generally never about you as a designer, as a costume designer." With the *Annie* for Target collection, it was all about the designer from the feature on the Target website to the collection's promotional materials to the hangtags. This collaboration certainly set precedent that will hopefully be integrated into the much-needed protocol for future costume and fashion crossovers. Corporate authors validate their claim to IP through their ability "to act as cultural intermediaries between creative laborers and consumers, offering trusted advice and guidance, as well as doctrine, on how best to interpret brand attributes and meanings."[43] Yet it is important to note that creative laborers like costume designers serve as intermediaries as well. They promote IP in interviews and on their social media in addition to offering advice on how to "get the look" of onscreen characters. At the party Target hosted for mommy bloggers to promote the collection, Kalfus interacted with consumers and walked them through the collection, providing context for the clothing.

I argue throughout this dissertation that creative laborers feel a personal connection to their work. In the case of costume designers, this makes them ideal managers of the costume IP, since they care about maintaining the integrity of their costume designs as they are used across different product lines and promotional materials. Furthermore, they know exactly how to do it. As discussed above, Kalfus adopted a hybridized identity of costume/fashion designer while working on the film and Target collection simultaneously. This enabled her to use the same inspiration for both projects and adapt it for the two

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[43] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet,* 94.

different contexts. Her ability to maintain this hybridized identity essentially kept the Target collection from becoming either entirely costume or entirely fashion. Instead, their meaning is open to interpretation and enables the type of imaginative play desired by consumers, especially children.

MOMMY-DAUGHTER DAY

In a 2012 *License Global* article, Mattel's senior vice president of global consumer products Rosa Zeegers is quoted saying: "Today's mom doesn't want to be told what to do. They talk to one another in online communities and make decisions based on advice from other moms."[44] This is the approach Target took to promoting the *Annie* collection. Target held a show-and-tell event for mommy bloggers and their kids at Target Studios, offering a sneak peek of the collection so that the bloggers could help create buzz leading up to its release. As Kalfus states, "the parents knew about that—the kids didn't really know Annie." Based on the videos, write-ups, and comments posted on social media about the event, it was clear that the moms were just as excited about the collection as the children. Kalfus styled the children using clothes from the collection, while the film's choreographer Zachary Woodlee gave a dance lesson using songs from the film. In doing so, these creatives invited the moms and children into the world of "Annie" in subtly controlled ways without explicitly teaching them how to interact with the clothing or enjoy the music. Furthermore, although it was not advertised, Kalfus is a mom and grandmother and therefore able to connect with the mommy bloggers on that level. In fact, the "tutu dress and jean jacket" were inspired be a memory she had of her daughter wearing a similar outfit as a kid.

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[44] "Barbie's Wow Factor," *License Global*, updated April 6, 2018, accessed April 13, 2023, https://www.licenseglobal.com/archive/barbies-wow-factor.

Many of the mommy bloggers, like Shannon Sutherland, were enthusiastic about sharing their *Annie* fandom with their children: "I am a huge fan of all things Annie so it was so special for me to share that love with my daughter."[45] That excitement carried over to the fashions, as the moms found themselves drawn to certain pieces: "it's the girls' band jacket that caught my eye… In fact, if it came in my size, I would buy one for myself, too."[46] Kalfus confirmed my suspicion during our conversation when she told me about moms at the party trying to fit into the size extra-large clothes. She admitted to attempting to squeeze into a pair of size 16 jeans herself. Thus, these moms are not just parroting the fan reactions of their children in these posts but engaging with the material themselves and taking an active role in the creation of content. By engaging with the fashion collection and writing about it on their blogs, these moms took an active role in the consumption process.

ANNIE: AVAILABLE NOW

I have argued for the importance of paratextual clothing in giving meaning and value to a text and extending the narrative into the real world, which is an assumption Target capitalized on in their ad campaign for the collection. The way merchandise tie-ins are presented as part of a cohesive transmedia story world and conflated with the text is epitomized by Target's promotional video announcing the *Annie* collection. In the short scene produced by Mirada Studios, a diverse trio of young girls smile and laugh as they chase each other playfully out of a subway station and down a city sidewalk. Two of them shake out their jackets, which instantly transform into different styles. The third cartwheels into an entirely new outfit and looks down at her fashionable attire in amazement and approval. The girls continue their fantasy play down the street, dancing around as they

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[45] Sutherland's post can be found on her blog: http://www.pooppeepuke.com/?p=20993.

[46] Clark's post can be found on her blog: http://losangelesstory.blogspot.com/2014/11/friday-finds-annie-for-target-band.html.

transform their outfits through movement. They are in control of who they want to be. In the end, they help one another transition into matching bright red dresses, of course with different accessories to maintain some sense of individuality. They nod in approval at one another's outfits and continue skipping and twirling down the sidewalk. The song playing in the background of the scene reminds viewers that "you're never fully dressed without a smile." As one girl turns back to call for their trusty canine companion, the camera steadies on a message superimposed on a brick wall: Annie. In theaters December 19. Available now. Only at Target.

Based on the writing on the wall, it is difficult to know exactly what the advertisement is for. Is it to promote the release of the upcoming film? Are these three girls the stars? Does it mean that the film is available at Target now and in theaters later? The final graphic implies that "Annie" is something immediately obtainable at your local Target store—even before it is released in theaters. And in a sense, it was. Although the film *Annie* was not out yet, consumers were given the tools to begin the narrative themselves by dressing in the fashion collection. Gray notes how some paratexts are not merely "*extensions* of a text… [but] our first and formative encounters with the text."[47] The promo video introduces consumers to *Annie* by reflecting the contemporary, hip-hop influenced aesthetic of the film and its message that young girls can be whoever they want to be. Particularly in the case of "female-driven studio films," Courtney Brannon Donoghue points out how "licensed product tie-ins frame audience participation through a postfeminist lens of empowerment consumerism and aspirational transformation."[48] In the case of *Annie* for

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[47] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 3.

[48] Courtney Brannon Donoghue, "Shop, Makeover, Love: Transformative Paratexts and Aspirational Fandom for Female-Driven Franchises," in *Point of Sale: Analyzing Media Retail*, eds. Daniel Herbert and Derek Johnson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 143.

Target, the collection provided many young consumers with their initial entrance into the "Annie" world along with the message that they were in control of their identity.

Target attempted to maintain the film's multiculturalism in their *Annie* for Target marketing campaign. The idea that girls have control over their self-expression through clothing and that anyone can "become Annie" is clearly conveyed in the promotional video described above where all three girls end up in matching red dresses. However, consumers felt that this sentiment did not carry over into the in-store ads for the collection. In-store displays featured group photos of girls from different ethnic backgrounds in mix-and-match items from the collection that accurately reflected the diversity of the updated film. But, the model dressed in the iconic red dress and Annie's locket was apparently white. A mother from Wilmington, Delaware felt that the ads were disrespectful to the film's star, Quvenzhané Wallis, and started a Change.org petition that received over 16,000 signatures. She writes: "The Red Dress is synonymous to Annie and we are not seeing that in any of your ads. When the original Annie came out, everything was about Aileen Quinn or a character/person that emulated her…why not now Target?"[49] Indeed, the Sears merchandise tie-in with the 1982 *Annie* film featured Aileen Quinn as the catalogue model.

The controversy regarding the in-store displays for the *Annie* for Target collection demonstrates the power of costume to become a stand-in for a character—a conflation that was encouraged by Target's marketing campaign, which used Kalfus's sketch of Annie's red dress in many of their promotional materials. By promoting the red dress as the symbol of the fashion collection, Target capitalized on people's nostalgic attachments to the iconic story of *Annie* and reinforced the red dress as the ultimate signifier of the character Annie.

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[49] The full text of the petition is available here: https://www.change.org/p/target-remove-the-target-annie-in-store-ads-if-you-cannot-show-better-diversity-in-all-of-your-stores.

While this was a successful tactic in many ways, it also backfired on them when they did not photograph the red dress on a Black model for the in-store ads. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the new movie was adapted from the musical, so it was seen as a betrayal to have a Black Annie. However, the collection was adapted from the new movie, so it was seen as a betrayal to *not* have a Black Annie.

What is most interesting about this controversy is that there really was no Annie in Target's in-store ads. The images came from a fashion shoot, not a play or movie. It was just a little girl wearing a red dress who was read as Annie due to the paratextual information surrounding the photo. Target never issued a formal apology, but sent a letter to the originator of the petition apologizing if they "let [her] and [her] daughter down,"[50] which comes across as corporate damage control rather than a sincere apology. Many found this disappointing, as Target positions themselves as inclusive. Their commercials usually feature models of diverse ethnicities, sizes, and abilities, and it is one of the few big box stores to use plus-size mannequins. The oversight should not have happened but was likely due to them not understanding the close connection between costume and character. The association between Annie and her red dress is so strong that it remained key to audiences' interpretations even when it was adapted into a contemporary costume and then adapted again for an entirely different context as fashion. A red dress is just a red dress, until you put an "Annie" label on it. Then, it becomes a material representation of a character and is held to the same expectations.

[50] The full letter from Target is available here: https://www.change.org/p/target-remove-the-target-annie-in-store-ads-if-you-cannot-show-better-diversity-in-all-of-your-stores/u/9183666.

BECOMING ANNIE

Typing "Annie for Target" into a Google search summons a list of results overwhelmingly focused on the controversy surrounding the in-store ads instead of information about the actual collection. On the other hand, the controversy does not seem to have affected the commercial success of the Target line. Kalfus recalls visiting a local Target store the day the collection launched and being told there was a line around the block. This buzz continued through the release of the film and into the holiday season. After the collection sold out at Target stores and online, many items were listed on eBay at inflated prices. Desperate mothers sent Kalfus personal messages on Instagram, begging her to find a red dress for their daughters. The widely-shared attachment to the character of Annie had created a market for a new version of the film along with a pre-existing consumer base for tie-in merchandise.

Heritage brands like "Annie" hold power in an era when consumption is seen as "an affective, engagement-seeking commitment."[51] The media industry's tendency to exploit affect to increase profits is a recurring theme throughout each chapter, whether it is the affect of production workers or fans. Yet I also aim to show how the courting of this affective attachment can be pleasurable for fans as well. Like the Lone Ranger licensed merchandise discussed by Santo, the *Annie* for Target collection was presented as a way to make the characters' adventures real "by allowing enthusiasts to embody their hero's attributes."[52] Kalfus describes the excitement of being at the *Annie* premiere and seeing several girls wearing clothes from the Target collection, pre-emptively identifying with the characters through everyday cosplay. The collection operated as a paratext of the film by framing *Annie*

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[51] Robert V. Kozinets, "Fan Creep: Why Brands Suddenly Need 'Fans'" in *Wired TV: Laboring Over an Interactive Future*, ed. by Denise Mann (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 162.

[52] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet,* 3.

and the accompanying "Annie" franchise as something that could be connected with and inhabited through the *Annie* for Target fan fashion collection. I now return to the fan-made "Annie Review Video" mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, which follows aspiring YouTube stars Lexie and Sydney as they go to AMC theaters to see *Annie*, then stop by Target to shop the fan fashion collection. The following analysis demonstrates the different ways consumers engaged with the film and fashions and sets the groundwork for a brief theoretical discussion of fan fashion's potential therapeutic benefits.

PERFORMING FANDOM THROUGH FASHION

The modes of engagement enacted by Sydney and Lexie in their fan-made review video exemplify the way fans personalize screen texts by identifying with characters' visual identities. The video was probably commissioned, and Sydney and Lexie, being aspiring actresses, are likely performing for the camera. Nevertheless, the video provides useful examples of how young consumers engage with the film and fashions or, at the very least, how they *think* they should engage with them. In his foundational text on identity performance, Erving Goffman writes that individuals presenting themselves to others "tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society," so their performance should be seen as "an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community."[53] Following that, the possible constructedness of their identity performances in the video does not detract from their value as examples of how fans interact with fan fashion. As fandom becomes more mainstream, so do the types of fannish behaviors performed by Lexie and Sydney become more normalized. Understanding how consumers engage with fan fashion can help licensors, licensees, and costume designers looking to be involved with these types of collections.

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[53] Erving Goffman, *The Performance of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 35.

The children's lack of a nostalgic tie to previous incarnations of *Annie* enabled them to focus entirely on the 2014 version, forming parasocial relationships with its characters and playing with the boundaries between fantasy and reality as they engaged with the film and Target collection. As Kalfus explains: "The thing that I wanted to give them was, like, some real connection to the movie, so that if they had that red dress and they saw Annie in it, how cool is that?" Rather than mentioning the music, dancing, or storyline, Lexie and Sydney begin their discussion of *Annie* by connecting with the character of Annie. While both girls acknowledge the existence of previous versions of Annie and therefore her status as a fictional construct, they still discuss the character as though she is a real person. Sydney does this through identification, noting how the old Annie was "white and had a red Afro" but the new one has "a different skin color, and her hair is not red, it's black like mine!" Sydney, who does not appear to be white, begins to form a personal connection with the character based on similarity of appearance and possibly racial or ethnic background. Although she certainly understands that the film is fictional, she does not merely speak of Annie as a character but also as a real person. Sydney acknowledges Annie as a construct by referring to the "old" and "new" versions of the character, but also treats Annie as a real individual by identifying with the character and applying the same schema she uses to understand herself. Sydney's ability to identify with Annie based on appearance reveals how the breaking of canon opened the text to a new group of potential fans that may have felt alienated from the previous film versions.

Lexie, on the other hand, shows more of a parasocial connection to the character, perhaps because she is white and does not initially identify with Annie's appearance as Sydney does. Lexie explains how she wants to see the film because she thought the commercial was "really funny" and had heard that Annie "had more personality." The use of "more" shows how Lexie is comparing the new Annie and the old Annie, just as Sydney did.

Her reference to the commercial makes it clear that she is aware that Annie is not only fictional but part of a film being actively advertised to her, apparently effectively, since it compelled her to desire more time with the characters. However, the character is also real to Lexie, and her comment about Annie's personality reflects the type of parasocial relationships that viewers often forge with fictional characters. We view them as friends or even family and invest emotionally in their stories. Viewing becomes equivalent to spending time with these fictional friends.

The tendency to perceive characters simultaneously as real and imaginary can be described using Cassandra Amesley's concept of "double viewing." Amesley defines it as "watching and interpreting with two sets of interpretative rules."[54] While the characters and their situations feel real, we are also acutely aware that what we see is the work of writers and other creative professionals. David Bordwell maintains that this occurs because viewers construct the character using the same schema they apply to real people.[55] Although Lexie and Sydney do not show the same level of intense emotional attachment as the *Star Trek* fans Amesley discusses, they reveal how this fannish tendency to play with the real/fictional boundary has been appropriated by more mainstream audiences. In the case of the collaboration between *Annie* and Target, the availability of real clothes worn by the fictional characters makes the collapse of these boundaries quite simple. The shared identity is only strengthened by "sharing" clothes as well.

After seeing and enjoying the film, Lexie and Sydney go to Target to try on clothes from the *Annie* for Target collection. The shirt that Lexie tries on is almost an exact replica of the shirt that Annie wears in the film's opening scene. It is a white, long-sleeve t-shirt

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[54] Cassandra Amesley, "How to Watch Star Trek," *Cultural Studies* 3, no. 3 (1989): 332.

[55] David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 156.

with a graphic design of multi-colored diamonds accentuated by little rhinestones. Lexie points out the rhinestones musing, "I think that's probably from Mr. Stacks, 'cause he's so rich." In doing so, Lexie engages directly with the *Annie* story world, making sense of the film's discussion of class difference and social mobility by engaging with the fan fashion. This aligns with Courtney Brannon Donoghue's assertion that consumers "have the ability to participate in these transformative narratives through retail."[56] Moreover, it supports my argument throughout this dissertation that fan fashion provides a space for storytelling and imaginative play.

Lexie is again willingly suspending her disbelief, conflating fantasy and reality, and engaging in the type of play that is characteristic of media fans. Jenkins argues that *Star Wars* "toys and trinkets" do not necessarily add to the narrative directly but take on "deeper meanings as they become resources for children's play or digital filmmaking,"[57] just as fan fashion does. Again, meaning and value are not inherent in texts or paratexts but are created by a combination of the producer's intentions, the presentation context, and the consumer's interpretation. Similarly, Gray suggests that fan-created videos provide "a reflective space in which viewers can engage more closely with the psyches, motivations, and specificities of multiple characters."[58] Although Gray's statement refers to fan videos that reimagine the narrative rather than review it, his assertion can be applied to other types of paratexts that fans create or engage with. Given that costume is so closely tied to character, styling and wearing costume adaptations provides a similar space in which viewers connect with characters' subjectivities and imagine their motivations. When Lexie

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[56] Brannon Donoghue, "Shop, Makeover, Love," 144.

[57] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 150.

[58] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 144.

tries on the shirt, she performs Annie's identity to an extent and imagines how she acquired the bedazzled shirt she is wearing, using elements from the narrative to justify the existence of the Target collection and thus reinforcing its status as an extension of the film.

This convergence of costume and fashion was enabled by Kalfus's involvement in designing both the film costumes and the fan fashion, the explicitly encouraged by Target's marketing campaign. Indeed, I argued above that the willingness of the consumer to accept the costume as "real" clothing speaks to the success of the costume designer in capturing the character and designing clothing that is truly relevant to the film and its audience. Kalfus admits that, for fans especially, the lines between cinema fantasy and everyday reality "are probably really blurred… [People] are fascinated with movies." The playful conflation of fantasy and reality is key to the practice of everyday cosplay and is a large part of what attracts consumers to media fashion collections. While Lexie appears to be engaging in everyday cosplay, Sydney's response to the *Annie* for Target collection is mostly based on their fashion appeal. She comments on how much she loves the pieces and is sad that most of the stock has been wiped out by Christmas sales. This reinforces the idea that the *Annie* for Target collection, and fan fashion more generally, simultaneously occupies the separate spaces of costume and fashion and enables fans to engage with the story world in their own ways.

Although children may feel an emotional attachment to *Annie* in the form of identification with the characters, parents are less likely to develop a strong personal connection to the text due to the lack of relatable adult characters in the film (with the exception of Grace, perhaps). Their presumed existing attachment to the "Annie" brand, however, encourages them to become emotionally involved in the experience of sharing *Annie* with their children. In the review video, the role of the "mom as director" is quite apparent. You can see her signature in the transitions between shots and popular music

track that plays at varying volume levels throughout the video. You can even hear her voice in the video commenting on and directing the action. After seeing the film, the girls sing a few bars of "It's a Hard Knock Life" before breaking into laughter and insisting that Annie does it better. A barely audible voice insists that they did a good job in the way that moms tend to encourage their children whether or not they show any real signs of talent. A couple minutes later, Sydney, Lexie, and Lexie's little brother Austin say in unison, "Let's go do something else!" though a fourth voice can be heard trailing slightly behind them—the voice of the mom behind the camera. It becomes clear that she provides the children with at least some of their dialogue and is either rehearsing the lines with them before rolling or shooting multiple takes. In her role as writer/director/producer, the mom goes beyond mere mediation of her children's fandom and becomes an active participant in its pleasures. In this way, the promotional campaigns framing *Annie* and the Target fashions as ways for parents to share their fandom and connect with their children were clearly successful.

EVERYDAY COSPLAY AS THERAPY

For many consumers, fan fashion is not only about connecting with characters but about feeling good. Consuming fan fashion requires integrating the character's visual identity with your own and adapting their costumes to fit your personal style. As previously mentioned, fan fashion collections differ from their historical predecessors in their focus on character over celebrity, affecting how the designs are conceptualized as well as how consumers engage with them. Joanne Finkelstein argues that popular culture serves as a "toolkit" for shaping one's personal identity, which is greatly influenced by the images and representations we encounter in films, television, and advertising.[59] When a young girl

[59] Joanne Finkelstein, *The Art of Self-Invention: Image and Identity in Popular Visual Culture* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 12.

aligns herself with the spunky, self-sufficient girls from *Annie* and performs that identity through clothing, she takes on the confidence and independence associated with the characters. Garry Crawford and David Hancock acknowledge that "one of the core issues" related to cosplay for academics and cosplayers themselves is—"to what extent is cosplay about playing out another character, or is it more a means by which cosplayers express or explore aspects of their own (existing) identity?"[60] My interviews with cosplayers and fan fashion enthusiasts, as well as my own experience as a participant observer in the fan fashion community, have shown that cosplay and everyday cosplay both involve a negotiation and merging of the branded identity and self identity. Indeed, Crawford and Hancock ultimately argue that cosplay is "not a performance of identity that sits on top of a deeper, more real identity; these performances are part-and-parcel of *who we are*, and they are *part* of our identity."[61]

Fan fashion collections often occupy a liminal space between costume and fashion, enabling consumers to play with the blurred boundaries between fantasy and reality. Through this type of everyday cosplay, consumers can appropriate the visual identity of fictional characters for their own self-expression. Collections like *Annie* for Target are not merely a way for the industry to make more money and exploit fans—they reflect a desire by mainstream audiences to engage tangibly with media and play with the line between reality and fantasy much as cosplayers do. By personalizing screen texts and engaging with paratexts like fan fashion, fans add value to the original text for themselves and other members of the fan community. Through such creative labor and personalization, viewers construct and perform their personal identity. This active consumption strengthens their

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[60] Garry Crawford and David Hancock, *Cosplay and the Art of Play: Exploring Sub-Culture Through Art* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 119.

[61] Crawford and Hancock, *Cosplay and the Art of Play*, 146.

attachment to the text, as they engage in what Paul Booth calls "media play." This involves viewers "creat[ing] meaning from activities that articulate a connection between their own creativity and mainstream media."[62] Especially in the age of convergence, production and consumption are intimately linked and participatory audiences continually make meaning from the text through the process of active consumption. Fan fashion provides a space for play and imagination that not only brings the consumer closer to the original film but may also offer personal and social benefits through the performance of an aspirational identity.

I have suggested here and in the previous chapter that the design and consumption of fan fashion provides a way to contribute to the transmedia story world, and I will continue to reinforce that point in the next two chapters. Just as cosplayers bring characters to life through their performances, those who engage with fan fashion and everyday cosplay merge the story world with the real world and thus "create new transmedia texts, which add to their understanding and engagement with a character."[63] The identity play involved in this type of imaginative storytelling and subtle, internal performance of everyday cosplay has the potential for personal and social benefits beyond fun and entertainment.

Just as Ellen Seiter argued for the therapeutic value of toys in *Sold Separately*, I believe that engaging with fan fashion can be effective mode of cinematherapy.[64] Positive psychologists believe that engaging with certain films can help build character strengths and promote an overall sense of well-being and personal fulfillment. For example, Ryan M. Niemiec and Danny Wedding argue that films are a "natural vehicle" for examining character strengths as they are uniquely "able to portray the subtleties of the human mind—

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[62] Booth, *Playing Fans*, 15.

[63] Crawford and Hancock, *Cosplay and the Art of Play*, 171.

[64] Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 190.

thoughts, emotions, instincts, and motives."[65] Films often foreground the 24 character strengths mapped out by positive psychologists—especially bravery, perseverance, love, kindness, humor, hope, creativity, and spirituality—and reveal how we can use these strengths to overcome obstacles and deal with conflict. By blurring the lines between fictional and real and considering how onscreen values can be integrated into the real world, viewers can learn from the characters they identify with. This connection and potential for personal growth are strengthened by the tangible ties offered by clothing. In the next chapter, I will provide more specific experiences of consumers' views on fan fashion and what they get out of it.

CONCLUSION

The product descriptions for the *Annie* for Target collection on Target's website began by highlighting the fashionable elements of the garments but were all accompanied by an informational paragraph assuring potential consumers that the collection "captures the essence of the movie's spirited characters." Unlike the 1930s costume adaptations discussed in the Introduction, the appeal of these looks is not based on the glamour of the star who originated them but on the qualities of the fictional character associated with it. Contemporary fan fashion collections, like *Annie* for Target, differ from their historical predecessors in their focus on character over celebrity, affecting how the designs are conceptualized as well as how consumers engage with them. Promotional paratexts encouraged consumers to see the *Annie* for Target collection as both costume and fashion, which enabled them to blur the lines between fantasy and reality and form a personal, tangible connection to the story world. When I asked Kalfus why she thought consumers

[65] Ryan M. Niemiec and Danny Wedding, *Positive Psychology at the Movies* (Cambridge: Hogrefe, 2013), 13.

would want to buy the red dress, she reasoned that "they buy it for every reason: to be Annie. They buy it because it's a Christmas dress and it came out at holiday season. It's shiny. You could wear it as a costume, you could wear it as a real dress." Indeed, Kalfus predicted the appeal of blurring the costume/fantasy/character with the fashion/everyday/self.

The fan fashion collection's success reveals the significance of nostalgic and emotional connections to engaging consumers with heritage brands. Furthermore, it lends credence to the media industry's reliance on licensed merchandise, showing that even poorly received films can be successful transmedia franchises. While this is a rare occurrence, the strength of "Annie" as a heritage brand overwhelmed negative reviews of the film and ensured the success of its merchandise. Hopefully, the collection's success will encourage other production companies and brands to give similar recognition and compensation when employing costume designers to adapt their work for the retail fashion market. Not only did the *Annie* for Target collection give girls the chance to "become Annie," it offered a model for the industry in its successful commoditization of costumes into sellable merchandise and recognition of the creative force of the costume designer.

CHAPTER 3: GEEK GIRL POWER

Starpuff Space is a private Facebook group where "hardcore customers" of independent fan fashion brand Elhoffer Design can chat about clothes, discuss geek media, post photos, ask for care and alteration advice, and give feedback and suggestions to designer/CEO Catherine Elhoffer and her team, who personally respond to the comments and posts.[1] One glance at the group makes it clear how tightknit of a community has formed around Elhoffer Design since Elhoffer founded the brand in 2016. The group operates well beyond a simple customer service page, enabling the formation of authentic connections between the Elhoffer Design team and its clientele, as everyone interacts on their personal Facebook accounts. When a new product is released and someone does not understand the reference, other Starpuffs are happy to explain and have even compiled a spreadsheet matching Elhoffer Design products with their source of inspiration. While Starpuff Space offers a practical way for the brand to get real-time feedback from its customers, the group's true value comes from the social interactions and interpersonal connections between fans. In this sense, Starpuff Space embodies the gift culture ideals often associated with fandom that are characteristic of the fan-run unlicensed fan fashion industry, where the clothes are merely a pretext to bring everyone together.

The unlicensed fan fashion industry emerged throughout the 2010s and grew parallel to the much larger and officially-sanctioned billion-dollar licensed merchandise industry that often fails to meet the needs of women, non-binary, and queer fans. Although licensed fan fashion companies like Her Universe and Hot Topic have tried to fill the fangirl merch gap, "the mainstreaming of an alternative form of cultural production is nearly always

[1] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, March 12, 2019.

synonymous with commercialization."[2] Because these companies are bound by licensing agreements, their clothes are less authentic, since their purpose is ultimately about promoting IP, not expressing fandom. Unlicensed fan fashion, on the other hand, is more authentic in that the creators are fans of the media that inspires their products, and it is created for the purpose of expressing one's fandom and sharing that with others. Karen Hellekson suggests that shifting fan activity from a gift culture to a monetary model is merely "subsuming it under the dominant paradigm that fandom is so frequently held up as working against."[3] However, I argue that it is possible to have an authentic, non-commercial fan-run industry. In this chapter, I look at how the shared values and practices of the unlicensed fan fashion industry foster community around clothing in a way that maintains the values of fandom's gift culture. Furthermore, I consider how the unlicensed fan fashion industry's labor ultimately benefits IP owners and their licensees.

Media scholar Brigid Cherry believes there are two ways of approaching fan art—focusing on the objects to find out "how fans read, interpret, and use the text" and focusing on the fan-producers to see "how they position themselves in relation to the text and to the fan culture itself… [and] the social interactions within the group."[4] Although much of fan studies takes the former perspective, the latter is equally important and is the perspective that Cherry and I take. While I consider the objects to an extent, it is ultimately in the service of understanding their creators, consumers, and the community surrounding them. Indeed, there are many parallels between this chapter and Cherry's study of fan handicrafters on the knitting and crocheting social media site Ravelry. Like Cherry, I utilize

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[2] Abigail De Kosnik, "Should Fan Fiction Be Free?," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (Summer 2009): 119.

[3] Karen Hellekson, "Making Use Of: The Gift, Commerce, and Fans," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 127.

[4] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 39.

"a participant-observation method… informed and underpinned by autoethnography" to understand and describe the micro-industry surrounding fan-made, unlicensed fan fashion.[5] In doing so, I aim to make a case for fan fashion as a unique, cohesive subculture as Henry Jenkins did for fanfic writers, vidders, and filkers.

Inspired by production studies and fan studies scholarship, I employ a discourse analysis of interviews with independent fan fashion designers, their personal and brand's internet presence, and appearances on Comic-Con panels. The interviews provide insight into: how someone breaks into the industry; how they conceptualize their work; how they find and connect with customers; the pros and cons of working without licenses; and the support they receive from the geek community. The brand owners interviewed—Paige Campbell (Quasar Creations), Arkeida Wilson (Classy Rebel Design), Sandra Botero (Heroicouture), Jordan Ellis (Jordandené), Ren Rice (Stitchcrvft), and Catherine Elhoffer (Elhoffer Design)—were at various stages in their careers, had different goals for their businesses, and create unique styles of clothing. Some brands, like Jordandené and Stitchcrvt, focus largely on t-shirts and accessories. Others, like Quasar Creations and Classy Rebel Design, adapt costumes into everyday cosplay items. Some designers design fan fashion full-time, whereas others are hobbyists. Nonetheless, a shared set of values and practices became apparent regarding similarities in their relationship with work, how they interact with the original text, their approach to design, business and marketing strategies, engaging with their customer base, and involvement in the geek community more generally.

Due to my reliance on participant-observation to get a true sense of the culture and community surrounding fan fashion, my study is inherently limited in scope. I am extrapolating from the portion of the community I have gotten to know and acknowledge

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[5] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 8.

that my focus on specific designers is due in part to access, personal relationships, and my taste in clothing (which ultimately influences the accounts Instagram encourages me to connect with). Furthermore, as with Cherry's study, my focus is largely on online communities and niche subcultures. Fan fashion enthusiasts may meet up at cons, but many of them are in online friendships due to living in different parts of the country and/or having met on social media. Additionally, these brands conduct all their transactions online, only occasionally selling products in-person at pop-up events and cons. So, while my attendance at San Diego Comic-Con certainly influences my work, I am more focused on virtual interactions and how unlicensed fan fashion designers present their personal and brand identities on social media.

THE PROFESSIONAL IS PERSONAL

In Angela McRobbie's study of the UK culture industries from 1998-2002, she noted the emergence of a neoliberal model in which the personal and professional identities of freelance creative professionals are intimately linked—a description that is equally relevant to the contemporary creative industries in the United States.[6] Marwick notes how neoliberalism is marked by "the infiltration of market logic into everyday social relations,"[7] which blurs the boundaries of the personal and professional self and promotes independent entrepreneurialism. Not only does market logic influence one's sense of self, but their personal values become tied up with work. Seemingly unbound by corporate structures, freelance creative professionals see work as a "source of self-actualization, even freedom and independence."[8] Through their work, unlicensed fan fashion designers help decide what

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[6] McRobbie, *Be Creative*, 18.

[7] Marwick, *Status Update*, 5.

[8] McRobbie, *Be Creative*, 19.

constitutes a fannish moment in a text and express themselves and their fannish passions through their work, thereby performing their identity as a fan-creator or "fantrepreneur."[9] The section discusses how the boundaries between the personal and professional are blurred for independent fan fashion designers, even more so than they are for costume designers, which affects their sense of identity, feelings of power, and mental health. I consider the significance of performing fan identity through feminized labor and discuss the contradictions of being an independent creative—the joy and empowerment that come from freedom as well as the anxiety and insecurity of precarious work.

IDENTITY & FEMINIZED LABOR

Many fan fashion designers trace their interest in pop culture to their childhoods or coming-of-age years, where it is tied up with fond memories of family and friends. Scholars like Paul Booth have argued that fandom is about nostalgia, specifically "the affective connection between an imagined ideal fan text and the initial experiences of the fan."[10] Engaging with the object of their fandom takes them back to those key moments in their lives. Through the act of creation, they gain "a sense of emotional connection to and possession of the text,"[11] not unlike costume designers who become invested in their work and feel a sense of ownership over it. Because fandom is an integral, long-term part of their identity performed through their creative labor, running a fan fashion brand feels personal. It is especially significant that fan fashion designers perform this identity through traditionally feminized labor to assert themselves in the male-dominated space of fandom,

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[9] Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*.

[10] Booth, *Playing Fans*, 19.

[11] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 112.

thus resisting the industry's perception of an idealized (male) fan and bringing visibility to the needs and interests of women and non-binary fans.

While fan fashion designers recognize that fandom has become mainstream and there is a larger demand for geeky clothing, they did not create their brands to capitalize on that trend. Instead, their brands are a way to share their fandom and talents with the community and perform their fan identity through clothing and design. Like fanfic, fan fashion "becomes a social activity for these fans, functioning simultaneously as a form of personal expression and as a source of collective identity."[12] To quote unlicensed fan fashion designer Arkeida Wilson directly, these designers "like to be nerdy and outwardly nerdy."[13] The creator's persona is "incorporated into the crafting," solidifying their relationship to the character and story.[14] Many unlicensed designers create what could be classified as "Artisanal Everyday Cosplay," according to Suzanne Scott's taxonomy of everyday cosplay, which includes "fancrafted clothing items" that differ from mass-produced apparel not only in appearance but in principle. The creator is expected to be "a self-identified fan of the given media object… more engaged with and responsive to their customer base, in line with the reciprocal ethos of a fan community."[15] Because fan fashion designers create products based on media that they consume during their free time, it is already impossible to fully separate work from one's personal life. Even when designers are not intending to do research for work, they cannot help but be inspired by what they consume during their off-time. If an unlicensed fan fashion designer receives requests for products outside of their

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[12] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 154.

[13] Arkeida Wilson, phone interview, March 6, 2019.

[14] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 29.

[15] Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*, 202.

fandom interests, they will either decline to design them or spend time immersing themselves in the fandom so they can understand what the community wants. Designers working on licensed fan fashion collections like those sold at Hot Topic do not get to choose which fandoms they create for, and therefore are not guaranteed to have the same personal connection to their work as unlicensed designers.

Furthermore, the unlicensed fan fashion community provides a safe space for women and non-binary people to perform their fandom. Fandom, even surrounding mainstream properties like *Marvel* and *Star Wars*, is still seen as masculine by other fans and the executives making licensing decisions. In *Fake Geek Girls*, Scott describes how "the convergence culture industry has rendered fangirls an invisible or undesirable segment of the 'fan' market" by propagating an idealized vision of fan identity that is gendered male.[16] Thus, there are far fewer products geared toward women, and female characters are often left out of merchandising. The exclusion of Gamora from *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) merchandise and Black Widow from *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) merchandise sparked #WheresGamora and #WheresBlackWidow social media campaigns, forcing Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige to assure fans in 2017 that the company was taking steps to ensure future women characters would not have the same issue.[17] However, earlier that year Marvel's Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing David Gabriel blamed low comic book sales on lack of interest in female characters and women fans, who "Marvel still considers… to be a surplus audience for mainstream superhero comics."[18] As Scott argues, women and non-binary fans are "routinely required to defend and authenticate their

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[16] Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*, 13, 21.

[17] Angie Han, "Marvel's Kevin Feige on #WheresBlackWidow: 'That's Not Going to Happen Anymore!,'" *Slash Film*, February 8, 2017.

[18] Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*, 1.

fannish credentials at best, and at worst subjected to out-and-out harassment."[19] Fan fashion designers resist mainstream notions of fandom as inherently masculine by performing their fandom in a feminine-coded way, i.e. through fashion, which "is significant in its own right."[20] Rather than folding to stereotypical notions of what it means to be a "real fan," fan fashion designers perform feminized labor to assert themselves and gain subcultural capital in a male-dominated space.

EMPOWERMENT & JOY

Being independent allows unlicensed designers to be more flexible and adapt to personal needs as well as customer demands and trends quickly and easily. Most of these brands are run by one person, so decisions can be made quickly and changes do not involve coordinating entire departments. Unlicensed fan fashion designers are empowered by having control over their creative labor and production. Unlike licensed brands, they can create for themselves and their community, not to please a boss or nameless consumer. For example, Elhoffer uses her brand's Discord to give and get "fast feedback" to and from her customers regarding fit and sizing. After making some fit changes to the Susan Crop to avoid it stretching out throughout the day, Elhoffer learned that some tops were coming out too tight and was able to fix the problem immediately. On the flip side, she is also able to easily communicate updates to her customers, not just through official announcements on social media but by answering individual customers' question on Discord, Facebook, and Instagram. The ability to quickly and easily work through product issues with customers is "so crucial."[21] The CEO of a large brand would not be connecting directly with consumers,

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[19] Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*, 20.

[20] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 34.

[21] Catherine Elhoffer, Zoom interview, November 11, 2021.

nor would the company be able to fix product issues in such a timely manner and without waste. Feelings of freedom and independence, as well as a love of the creative process, enable fan fashion designers to find joy through self-expression and sharing the fruits of that labor with others.

Flexibility and control are especially important for people who are running their brand on their own in addition to another job and/or personal responsibilities. Fan fashion is something that can fit into their lives, rather than an obligation they must work around. Unlicensed designers choose how much time they spend on their brand and can adjust that amount according to their availability at any given time. For example, when Ellis started a full-time job in 2020 and an accelerated graduate degree program in 2021, she was able to prioritize those and put whatever time she had left into Jordandene and Sartorial Geek. Although it was "pretty unfun," she spent ten months working for eight hours, doing homework, and then she would "*maybe* get lucky and be able to post on Instagram a couple times." While the CEO of a large brand would likely have to step down or take an official leave of absence, Ellis is able to adapt her brands to fit her life at any given time. Her customer base may not be as large, but they are loyal, so she was able to be up front about the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on her business and how graduate school was taking up the majority of her time.[22] Rather than pushing customers away, this type of transparency helps create a bond between brand and consumers, who feel like they know the designer personally.

Furthermore, running a fan fashion brand provides opportunities for personal growth, as designers develop new skills and learn from their mistakes. Like McRobbie argues, the cultural "imperative to 'be creative' is an invitation to discover one's own

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[22] Jordan Ellis, Zoom interview, April 12, 2022.

capabilities, to embark on a voyage of self-discovery."[23] Most unlicensed fan fashion designers start their brands with little to no formal training in business and/or fashion, so they are forced to learn as they go. Ellis, for instance, taught herself how to screen-print shirts. She has not only gained practical knowledge but also "broadened [her] horizons" around fandom for the sake of her brand.[24] Through her conversations with customers and friends in the fan fashion community, she has gotten to know new fandoms, keeping "an ear out for really cool characters that fans love that they don't feel like are getting enough love from bigger companies who should be paying more attention to them."[25] Ellis started her brand specifically because she wanted a way to connect to the fan community, so she genuinely enjoys all aspects of work that involve social media and interacting with customers. The joy of creative labor does not just come from working with one's hands or expressing oneself, it is also about trying new things, learning, and growing. In fact, the ability to be creative and possibility of finding self-fulfillment in work is seen as an appropriate reward for dealing with the stress and insecurity of precarious work. Jenkins argues that "there is something empowering about what fans do with those texts in the process of assimilating them to the particulars of their lives."[26] Whether their passions lie in design, creation, building community, or mainly with the source text, these designers enjoy the labor itself.

Even the unlicensed designers who run their brand full-time (or hope to) describe fan fashion design as "not work" and contrast it with more traditional careers. As with other

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[23] McRobbie, *Be Creative*, 15.

[24] Jordan Ellis, phone interview, February 28, 2019.

[25] Jordan Ellis, phone interview, February 28, 2019.

[26] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 284.

forms of fan production, fan fashion design is defined by affect and "can be an exceedingly pleasurable undertaking in its own right."[27] Especially without any formal experience in fan fashion or business, Botero was "bootstrapping" for the first two years of running her brand. She dealt with textile designs, clothing designs, patterns, sewing, and sourcing, in addition to handling "marketing, advertising, social media, going to cons, packing, unpacking, getting displays… down to little things like hang tags."[28] Nevertheless, she spoke the most explicitly about this tendency to categorize fan fashion design as "not work," saying: "my personal life is really more Heroicouture, and my work life is Florida Virtual School," where she teaches Spanish entirely online.[29] Although she enjoys teaching, fan fashion is what makes her "happy… so, it doesn't feel so much like working."[30] This exemplifies McRobbie's argument that the so-called "refusal of work" is actually "a desire and a yearning for rewarding work" as opposed to more traditional careers, which are seen as "unrewarding, mundane."[31] Despite the fact that Heroicouture takes a lot of time and energy and keeps Botero "constantly busy," running the brand is therapeutic, because it enables her to express a key part of her identity in a creative way.[32] While the reality of being an independent creative is often fraught with precarity, the perception of power and control over one's own labor and the ability to express oneself through creative endeavors is seen as a privilege worth the struggles that accompany it.

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[27] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 10.

[28] Sandra Botero, Zoom interview, November 11, 2021.

[29] Sandra Botero, phone interview, February 27, 2019.

[30] Sandra Botero, Zoom interview, November 11, 2021.

[31] McRobbie, *Be Creative*, 93.

[32] Sandra Botero, phone interview, February 27, 2019.

MENTAL HEALTH & BURNOUT

Although unlicensed fan fashion designers love their work, they recognize that there are downsides to mixing the professional and personal. Maintaining a proper work/life balance is important to all of the designers, but it is challenging to maintain a balance between things that are often one in the same. Financial concerns, limited time, and having to fulfill multiple roles, including those outside one's skill set, can cause stress and anxiety. For many creative professionals, putting one's work out into the world feels like exposing oneself. Self-doubt becomes a factor in a way it does not for purely professional pursuits, and there is a real and justified fear among designers that business setbacks will affect them personally. Because work is personal, designers are emotionally invested, which can take its toll on mental health, so they must be mindful about practicing self-care and avoiding burn out. However, despite any negative consequences of making the professional personal, these designers' creative labor is ultimately rewarding and fulfilling.

For many independent designers, their main anxiety is around finances, as they are funding their businesses themselves and relying on sales to pay living expenses. Those who live alone have nobody to split bills with and put themselves into a stressful situation by investing their money in a brand that does not provide a consistent income. Even someone as confident and experienced as Elhoffer admits that being independent is "terrifying," because if you do not make consistent sales, you cannot pay your bills.[33] All of Botero's profits have "gone right back into the business," and while there is some loss, she understands "that's also part of the whole growing pains."[34] She prefers funding her brand with personal savings instead of taking out a loan, "because the idea of having huge debt just

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[33] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, March 12, 2019.

[34] Sandra Botero, Zoom interview, November 11, 2021.

scares me to death after all the student loans I had and stuff like that."[35] With people's personal finances tied up in their brands and their living space often serving as their work space, things like unsold stock are an unavoidable and constant reminder of personal disappointment and financial instability: "when you sit and you're looking at this whole stock of something that you really enjoyed and they're just not selling, it's like, well now I'm just out money."[36] The lack of physical separation between work and personal life exacerbates feelings of overwhelm and makes it more difficult to separate the two.

Unfortunately, burn out is common among fan fashion designers, as it is among most creative laborers, especially those with blurred boundaries between personal and professional lives. Rachael Sabotini refers the "darker side" of gift culture, which involves "dealing with the expectations and demands placed on the high-status fan to keep producing and keep supplying the fandom with a specific type of gift."[37] However, with fan fashion designers, the pressure to create typically comes from the designers themselves, who not only must work hard to keep their independent business afloat but who enjoy the work so much that it is easy to lose oneself in it. When Rice first started their brand, they knew that if they did not set a schedule, they would either do nothing productive all day or do nothing but work all day. McRobbie points out that, in the contemporary creative industries, "people increasingly have to become their own micro-structures… which in turn requires intensive practices of self-monitoring."[38] Especially when there are no roommates to keep Rice connected to reality and force some socializing, "it can get pretty bad," because they will be

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[35] Sandra Botero, Zoom interview, November 11, 2021.

[36] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

[37] Rachael Sabotini, "The Fannish Potlatch: Creation of Status Within the Fan Community," The Fanfic Symposium, December 20, 1999, https://trickster.org/symposium/symp41.htm.

[38] McRobbie, *Be Creative*, 18.

so "laser-focused" on their work that they will ignore everything else.[39] The pressure to be one's own boss and sole employee requires a lot of time and energy, and when the work is enjoyable, it can easily overwhelm everything else.

When your personal identity becomes your work and your work takes over your personal life, it is impossible not to feel a strong emotional attachment to it. This is exemplified in Elhoffer's statement that "the company is me. It's so raw… I put my soul into this"[40]—evoking the brand as a living thing that is vulnerable and extremely personal. That is why she would never sell her brand to a larger company like Hot Topic. Money is not the priority, self-expression and humanity are. This attachment to work and pride in creation leads designers to go out of their way to ensure customers are satisfied. They are not just trying to get good feedback or build brand loyalty, the personal nature of their work makes it a "need." This dedication does not go unnoticed by their customers, but negative feedback on their brand or products can take a personal toll. If a product gets messed up for some reason, Elhoffer gets "so upset mentally," because she does not want to disappoint her customer base.[41] Even if it is not her fault, she feels personally responsible for her customers' happiness because of her emotional investment in her brand. If a customer was not happy with one of Elhoffer's handmade garments, she felt "like a failure."[42] When you are your brand, setbacks at work cannot help but feel like personal setbacks as well. Support from the fan fashion community helps designers work through these setbacks and motivates them to continue creating.

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[39] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

[40] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, March 12, 2019.

[41] Catherine Elhoffer, Zoom interview, November 11, 2021.

[42] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, March 12, 2019.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

> *I am very happy not working with licenses, and I say that because I try not to copy any designs directly from the movie or comic. I like to keep it as an inspiration… I don't want to completely copy somebody else's work. I would rather it just seem 'inspired by,' because that's kind of how geek bounding is.*[43]

> *If you know certain things, you might recognize it. If you don't, it won't mean much to you… I just say it's an elevated fandom look and it's fashion Easter eggs. You know, you recognize what it is and you get excited because you're wearing your fandom, but you're not screaming cosplay.*[44]

This section considers the design principles shared by fan fashion designers and how they manifest in the fan's design process, aesthetics, and tendency toward obscure references, which reinforces their alterity from mainstream licensed merchandise and therefore authenticity. Unlicensed fan fashion designers take costumes and characters and adapt them into everyday, fashionable clothing. In doing so, they become storytellers who add to the transmedia story world. Unlicensed fan fashion is decidedly not cosplay, and much of it falls on the opposite end of the cosplay continuum. It is personal, subtle, and truly meant to be part of the everyday. These design principles are shared among all the designers and are a key part of what makes unlicensed fan fashion design culture unique. Because these brands fly under-the-radar and use a code language to describe their products, they can be difficult for outsiders to find. However, this merely reinforces their alterity and affirms their status as authentic products made by "real" fans as opposed to mainstream licensed merchandise.

TRANSLATION & STORYTELLING

As argued in Chapter 1, costume designers are authors and storytellers. Their work not only tells you who a character is but also serves the larger narrative. They combine the

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[43] Arkeida Wilson, phone interview, March 6, 2019.

[44] Sandra Botero, Zoom interview, November 11, 2021.

language of clothing and the language of film to tell a story through costume. Academics in the fields of dress and film often use linguistic metaphors to explain how meaning is transmitted through the art forms. Theorists speak of the words, discourse, and dialects of their medium and other aspects that make up its "language."[45] Clothing provides the vocabulary for a language that is spoken by the individual through their personal style. Garments form the basics of the sentence, while embellishments and accessories serve as modifiers like adjectives and adverbs.[46] As Constance Classen explains, "language links pens and needles—the spinning or the weaving of words for poetry, the fabric of storytelling."[47] Fan fashion designers are translators and storytellers—remaking screen costume and fictional characters in the language of the everyday. Through their creative adaptations of characters, catchphrases, and significant scenes into clothing and accessories, they connect with and contribute to the transmedia story world. In this sense, the narrative play performed by fan fashion designers is not unlike that of fanfic writers or vidders.

While cosplay is often understood as rote replication of an original costume and is on the opposite end of the cosplay continuum as fan fashion, Ellen Kirkpatrick's theorization of cosplay as "translation" is an apt way to describe what fan fashion designers do—it is not about copying something word for word but involves interpretation and problem solving.[48] If someone is translating a novel into another language, they do not translate it word for word. Every language has its own set of rules and modes of expression. Sometimes, a direct

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[45] See, for example: Roland Barthes, Andy Stafford, and Michael Carter, *The Language of Fashion* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).; Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion as Communication* (London: Routledge, 2008).; Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008).

[46] Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 10-11.

[47] Constance Classen, *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender, and the Aesthetic Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 99.

[48] Ellen Kirkpatrick, "Toward New Horizons: Cosplay (Re)Imagined Through the Superhero Genre, Authenticity, and Transformation," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 18 (2015): 2.3.

translation of a phrase causes it to completely lose its meaning. Thus, a translator may change the words to convey the proper meaning in another language. Shannon K. Farley explains that the field of translation studies has broadened its definition of translation beyond two language systems, thinking of translation as something that "constitutes a deconstruction and a retelling."[49] Fan fashion designers act as translators who deconstruct the story and retell it in the form of everyday dress.

An unlicensed fan fashion designer's translation is filtered through their personal viewpoint and brand identity, resulting in a variety of unique designs based on the same IP. Fan fashion designers' approach is similar to what Cherry calls "interpretive" handicrafting, which allows "much more personal activity on the part of the fan," as opposed to mimetic and emblematic crafting. Interpretive handicrafting is a more personalized interpretation and "functions much more as a transformative work—inspired by but playing with the text."[50] Even when approaching something that seems to demand a direct translation, the designers will still put "a little bit of a spin."[51] As with other seemingly mimetic fan work, there are "certain transformative details that individualize each item."[52] Unlicensed fan fashion designers consider not just the costume but the production design, the character's personality, and what is happening in the scene in which the character wears the costume as well as their overall narrative arc. In this sense, fans approprite the details they like and use them to create something new, thereby becoming "active producers and manipulators of

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[49] Shannon K. Farley, "Translation, Interpretation, Fan Fiction: A Continuum of Meaning Production," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 14 (2013): 1.1.

[50] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 88.

[51] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

[52] Booth, *Playing Fans*, 18.

meanings."[53] (Although, as will be discussed later in the chapter, these types of fan activities are not as illicit as they once were.) In addition to expressing their own identity through their creative labor, fan fashion designers adapt a character's identity, forcing a cultural and personal negotiation.

Because designers focus on different details and filter them through their personal viewpoint, there is a lot of variety within the fan fashion world. As Kirkpatrick explains, translation is "a boundless process" with an infinite number of ways of interpretation and creating meaning.[54] This becomes evident when looking at how one character, like Captain Marvel, is translated by different designers. Comic book hero Carol Danvers aka Captain Marvel first appeared onscreen as part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) in *Captain Marvel* (2019). Costume designer Sanja Milkovic Hays collaborated with Marvel Studios director of visual development Andy Park, who created the initial design that Hays and her team helped transform from a concept into a costume. Hays and Park wanted to create a supersuit that embraced Danvers' femininity without sexualizing her, presenting the character as strong and confident. Hays described Captain Marvel as "a girl with an attitude and rightfully so, she has nothing to prove" and hoped she would be relatable for young women.[55] Despite backlash from male Marvel fans, most women fans embraced the character, who spawned a variety of licensed and unlicensed fan fashion.

Botero designed a "Captain Carol" fabric that she uses on a variety of Heroicouture products. It features red and blue zig-zags on a yellow background with eight-point gold

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[53] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 23.

[54] Kirkpatrick, "Toward New Horizons," 4.6.

[55] Emily Zemler, "Captain Marvel's Costume Designer on Not Giving the Hero a Sexier Outfit," *Vogue India,* March 19, 2019, https://www.vogue.in/content/captain-marvel-costume-designer-on-not-giving-the-hero-a-sexier-outfit.

stars on alternating peaks of the zig-zags. Between the name and the use of the star (Captain Marvel's emblem), it is obvious what the design references. However, Botero was careful to avoid copyright infringement by using a standard eight-point star rather than one with the same proportions and dimensions as Captain Marvel's. The resulting fabric is bright and playful because of the colors but bold and strong with the sharp corners and geometric pattern, keeping with the essence of Captain Marvel's original costume. Elhoffer Design's "Corps Dress" also offers a sense of bold femininity, but in a different way. The dress is navy with wine red and gold accents and uses color blocking and piping to mimic the lines of Captain Marvel's supersuit. The short-sleeve bodice is fitted and can be unzipped depending on how low of a neckline the wearer wants. The full, flared skirt offers a classically feminine silhouette, which is tempered by the use of deep colors and angular color blocking. Ellis's "Higher Further Faster" shirt for Jordandené features the film's tagline, which is also a nod to one of Kelly Sue DeConnick's arcs in the Captain Marvel comic books series titled *Higher, Further, Faster, More*. The lettering is in a bold cursive font with each word on a different line so the design stretches across the wearer's entire chest. The phrase is always printed in blue (like Captain Marvel's supersuit) but was offered on a variety of different t-shirt styles and colors. Unlike some of Jordandené's other hand-lettered shirts, there are no decorative flourishes on the text. It is bold and straightforward, like Captain Marvel. Botero, Elhoffer, and Ellis took visual cues from Captain Marvel's supersuit and filtered them through their own personal design style and brand identity to create very different designs that still reflect the character and stay true to the spirit of the original costume design.

The ability to bring their unique interpretation and aesthetic to fan fashion design is a freedom allowed specifically because they are unlicensed. The personal aspect is often lost with licensed merchandise, as the designers typically receive tech packs from licensors with color schemes, requirements regarding logo placement and usage, etc. Not only are

unlicensed fan fashion designers not required to use logos or likenesses, they are not allowed to use copyrighted material, which challenges them to be creative in how they translate costumes and characters into fashion. Botero spoke proudly of some of the creative designs she had come up with to avoid copyright infringement, such as her Number Thirteen fabric, inspired by Jodie Whittaker's turn as the Doctor on *Doctor Who*.

> The box is yellow… so, it's not copyrighted. If I use that specific box with blue, then it's copyrighted… it's the silhouette of number 13, so there's no like actual likeness and it's the same thing with the box, you know, it's yellow. So it kind of looks like it's tinted because of the light and space as the thing. So, yeah, so it's things like that… you know what it is, but it doesn't come right out and scream at you either.[56]

Botero is proud of the solution she found, which still aligns with the character's aesthetic and makes logical sense within the story world. Unlicensed fan fashion designers flip the script, choosing to see the necessity of avoiding copyright infringement as ultimately aiding their quest for subtlety rather than restricting their creativity.

Through the process of translating a costume or character into everyday dress, fan fashion designers become storytellers. Indeed, fan fashion design is similar to the "imaginative play" of fanfic and fan art, which "transform the text, not only in terms of embodying affective responses but also to create narratives in their own right."[57] For example, Stitchcrvft's Romantics Collection was inspired by Rice's love of the Regency era, the film *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), and a fantasy they had during the COVID-19 pandemic: "If I could be quarantined anywhere, I would wanna be quarantined in England, in a chateau with my friends. And we run around in these grassy fields in just undergarments, light and airy. It's summer all the time, like it's so pretty. We're reading books in trees. This is what I want to do right now instead of being in this stupid

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[56] Sandra Botero, phone interview, February 27, 2019.

[57] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 122.

apartment."[58] The collection is the materialization of that story and Rice's *Pride and Prejudice* fandom, like fanfic told through clothing. The text becomes "encoded in the material object."[59] In this sense, fan fashion designers contribute to transmedia story worlds through their labor and play.

SUBTLETY & VERSATILITY

Cherry noted that handicrafters might find it useful to avoid drawing attention to themselves as fans, especially "where the fandom is one that has been subjected to ridicule (as with *Twilight*)."[60] Fan fashion designers and consumers, on the other hand, have shown no such concern for being ridiculed for their fandom. Nevertheless, they understand that there is still a stigma attached to fandom in certain spaces, and that there is a time and place for everything. People may not always want to prioritize that part of their identity and might even be rejected for it. In Elizabeth Affuso's work on fan-oriented makeup lines, she notes how the "personal intimacy" of makeup allows fans to participate in a form of everyday cosplay without anyone else knowing.[61] Most unlicensed fan fashion designers focus on creating subtle and versatile fashions, ensuring that their products can be worn anywhere and customized according to each customer's personal style and fandoms. Furthermore, it sets them apart from licensed merchandise and protects them from copyright infringement. In the same way that costume designers work to distinguish themselves from fashion, it is important to many unlicensed fan fashion designers that their work does not come across as "cosplay-ish." Moreover, their approach to design aligns with the ethos of Disneybounding

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[58] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

[59] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 19.

[60] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 22.

[61] Affuso, "Everyday Costume," 187.

which, as discussed in the Introduction chapter, is all about creating a character-inspired look that is decidedly not a costume.

Interpretive fan fashion makes it possible to feel connected to one's fandom in environments where most mainstream licensed fan apparel (such as graphic tees or trompe l'oeil skater dresses) would not be appropriate, like a corporate office. Wilson had trouble finding work-appropriate clothing that allowed her to be "outwardly nerdy" and realized she would have to make it herself.[62] While cosplaying "always takes place in a specific social context,"[63] unlicensed fan fashion designers want people to be able to integrate fandom into everyday life. So, unlicensed fan fashion designers aim to make subtle and versatile clothing that is adaptable to a variety of settings and allowing wearers to choose how obvious or covert they want to be. Elhoffer and other fan fashion designers believe they should not be making that decision for people: "If you're already putting patches on the things, you take away that subtlety, and you're forcing the person to go balls to the wall hardcore."[64] Furthermore, branding clothing with logos or more specific costume details takes away from a customer's ability to interpret the clothing in a way that aligns with their desires and interests. For example, when Elhoffer released a Captain Marvel-inspired sweater in the green and black Kree color scheme, people asked if it was Loki, Slytherin, or even the green Power Ranger. Elhoffer replied that "it's whoever you want it to be. That's the beauty of this."[65] People can take the material given and create whatever they want with it. Subtle,

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[62] Arkeida Wilson, phone interview, March 6, 2019.

[63] Nicolle Lamerichs, "Stranger Than Fiction: Fan Identity in Cosplay," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 7 (2011): 2.1.

[64] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, March 12, 2019.

[65] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, March 12, 2019.

versatile unlicensed fan fashion invites customers to join in on the storytelling process as well and provides a tangible connection to story worlds.

Disneybounding (or bounding) is about emulating a character without replicating their costume, and this ethos transfers to design of unlicensed fan fashion. Elhoffer Design, for instance, markets their products as "geek bound apparel." In addition to offering and fun and social way to express one's fandom, Disneybounding provides a way around Disney Parks' rule forbidding people over the age of fourteen from wearing a costume. Disney has costume rules for many reasons "including safety of children in the parks interacting with adults and the protection and tight control of its branding and intellectual property."[66] Furthermore, they do not want to confuse other guests or draw attention away from the paid Disney employees dressed as characters and offering paid photo opportunities. With bounding, fans get to participate in the fantasy of Disney Parks and show their "love and appreciation of Disney through fashion,"[67] without interfering with Disney's profits from character meet-and-greets and photo opportunities. In approaching design as translation and creating clothes on the subtle end of the cosplay continuum—referencing original costumes without copying patterns or emblems—most unlicensed fan fashion designers naturally steer clear of anything that would encroach on licensors' IP.

Licensed merchandise is often heavily branded and does not have the versatility of bounding apparel, which enables a type of everyday cosplay that offers the same expressive and social benefits of cosplay while remaining within the norms of everyday dress. Beyond projecting fandom outward, unlicensed fan fashion offers the chance for identity play—to negotiate one's own identity with that of a character's and immerse oneself into the story

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[66] Victoria Pettersen Lantz, "Reimagineering Tourism: Tourist-Performer Style at Disney's Dapper Days," *The Journal of Popular* 52, no. 6 (December 2019): 1340.

[67] Leslie Kay quoted in Nasserian, "Interview: DisneyBound Explained by Leslie Kay."

world. On a more personal level, it validates one's fan identity and inclusion in the fan community as well as providing a fun way to play with fandom and integrate it into everyday life as subtly or loudly as one likes. The subtlety and creativity of bounding allows fans to "perform their identities and to display their fan attachments to specific characters, attractions or movies"[68] through clothing that is firmly outside the realm of costume and within the category of everyday dress. Paul Booth asserts that the fandom-inspired outfits styled using the website Polyvore, which he calls "digital cosplay" but would be more accurately referred to as bounds or closet cosplays, are not costumes but "everyday clothes elevated to the level of fictionality."[69] Indeed, the main goal of many unlicensed fan fashion designers is ensuring their clothing "doesn't look like cosplay."[70]

Elhoffer Design's "Corps Dress" is inspired by Captain Marvel, but there are no branded elements that easily mark it as such, unlike licensed brand Her Universe's Captain Marvel Halter dress. The Her Universe dress is "cosplay-ish" and based on a very clear and straightforward adaptation of Captain Marvel's supersuit onto a decidedly feminine silhouette. The short, flared navy dress features a red bust line and red sash that echo Captain Marvel's breastplate and belt, while also accentuating the wearer's feminine curves. It is branded with Captain Marvel's signature eight-point gold star and is unmistakably meant to reference a superhero. Elhoffer's Corps Dress, on the other hand, uses fabric panels and piping in rich gem tones to mimic the lines of Captain Marvel's supersuit without replicating the design directly. The combination of the longer hemline, deeper colors, and creative interpretation results in a dress that subtly captures the essence of the character

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[68] Rebecca Williams, *Theme Park Fandom* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 195.

[69] Booth, *Playing Fans*, 169.

[70] Arkeida Wilson, phone interview, March 6, 2019.

and enables fans to feel like Captain Marvel while still maintaining a sense of personal style. The Elhoffer Design Facebook group, Starpuff Space, is filled with posts and comments about people eager to wear their Corps Dress to work or a business casual event as well as follow-up posts sharing excitement over people at the event who recognized the inspiration for the dress.

Although most unlicensed fan fashion designers do not want or need licensing, they are fully aware of the benefits licensees are afforded. Working with a licensor protects the brand from legal action, offers support and helps brands reach a larger audience, and gets them access to images and information ahead of releases. Although most unlicensed fan fashion does not infringe on IP anyway, it is "a huge bit of relief making things" when you know you "can't get sued."[71] Unlicensed designers readily admit that having the resources of a large licensor at their disposal would be great and help them expand their audience. There are certain doors that they cannot open as independent designers with few connections in the fashion and media industries. A licensor's support can help "can get the brand out even more."[72] Licensors want their licensees to do well, because it generates more profits for them as well. Furthermore, licensees have access to images from upcoming films and series so they can align their collection releases with the premieres. While independent designers generally like having the freedom to put out new designs whenever they would like, there are benefits to aligning releases. Certain things might take a while to develop, and for fan fashion designers with limited time and resources and no advance information, it "might be too late" to really capitalize off the excitement of a new release.[73] Still, the creative freedom

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[71] Jordan Ellis, phone interview, February 28, 2019.

[72] Sandra Botero, Zoom interview, November 11, 2021.

[73] Sandra Botero, Zoom interview, November 11, 2021.

gained by not having to follow licensing restrictions outweighs the freedom lost by not being able to use logos and other explicit references.

For unlicensed fan fashion designers, their brands are personal, and it is important to them that the brand reflect their personal values, interests, and aesthetic. Staying small enables brands to stay loyal to their personal values and offer higher quality customer service and products. Hyde explains that "when emotional ties are the glue that holds a community together, its size has an upper limit."[74] Unlicensed designers' main goal is to connect with the community and provide their customers with the clothing they always wished licensed brands had offered. They are less focused on large profits than on consistent profits from a loyal customer base. Elhoffer says she does not "want to overreach" or "have a physical store," and she does not "want my company to be a $10 million company with no solid foundation."[75] For Elhoffer, the foundation of a brand is its customer base. There is no point in scaling if you do not have a loyal "audience" to sell to, and one that you can rely on to stick around. Unlicensed designers know and engage with their customers on an individual level, creating a level of brand loyalty that is hard to achieve with a large, corporate brand.

OBSCURITY & AUTHENTICITY

Fan fashion is no longer relegated to niche stores and is now available from mass retailers like Hot Topic and high-end boutiques like Opening Ceremony. Affuso explains that the "new visibility comes with the destigmatization of fan products that is directly related to the mass appeal of comic book franchises and the reframing of nerds in

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[74] Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2019), 115-116.

[75] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, March 12, 2019.

contemporary culture."[76] What was once considered fringe is mainstream, and now being nerdy is cool. Like Dick Hebdige argues, all subcultures are eventually commodified and incorporated into the dominant culture.[77] When the mainstream industry incorporates fandom, it "changes the ideology of fandom from transformative to commercial, from niche to mainstream."[78] Thus, "real," long-term fans feel the need to differentiate themselves and their products from the commercial, licensed goods and casual fans. Fan fashion designers recognize that fandom is becoming mainstream but insist they are outside that, supporting Paul Booth's argument that despite the mainstreaming of geek media and merchandise, "more intimate, on-the-ground visions of fan culture help to create and frame the type of alterity… reinforcing the subcultural positionings of fandom for mainstream and fan shoppers."[79] Unlicensed fan fashion designers work to fill the gaps left by licensed products and therefore tend to focus on deep cuts, obscure references, and characters that are left out of licensed merchandise deals. This ability to reference "deep cuts" secures the designers' status as an "authentic" fan. Furthermore, fan fashion designers use code language to name, describe, and market their products to avoid catching the attention of IP owners. Although this code language can make unlicensed fan fashion products difficult to find, this merely reinforces their alterity and authenticity and creates a sense of community among fans who "get it."

Unlicensed fan fashion brands want to offer something different and unique that aligns with actual fan interests and not what will appeal to the masses. They are able to do

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[76] Affuso, "Everyday Costume," 184.

[77] Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1979), 93-94.

[78] Booth, *Playing Fans*, 78.

[79] Paul J. Booth, "Framing Alterity: Reclaiming Fandom's Marginality," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 28 (2018): 1.5.

this specifically because they are unlicensed and do not have to answer to anyone but other fans: “no one's telling us who we have to design for and who we should leave out because they don't have a big enough fan base. We can focus on smaller characters that we think are cooler, even if that's not where the most money is.”[80] Ellis’s brand Jordandené offers a series of products with the phrase “And Peggy” printed on them, referencing the song “The Schuyler Sisters” from the Broadway musical *Hamilton*. Since Peggy Schuyler is not a main character in the musical (which is part of the humor of the “and Peggy” lyric), the official Hamilton merchandise does not feature her on her own. Licensed t-shirts feature the silhouettes of all three Schuyler sisters or a famous line sung by the eldest sister Angelica, but Jordandené’s Peggy shirt proved popular among fans. Ellis explains that “there are a lot of really cool moments… that aren’t flashy… they’re a little bit deeper that fans appreciate but mainstream doesn’t always.”[81] For many unlicensed fan fashion designers, licensed merchandise is for the mainstream, whereas unlicensed fan fashion is for “real” fans looking for something more meaningful or unique.

Some independent fan fashion brands depend so heavily on insider knowledge that they offer meta products about fandom itself. As with fan handicrafting projects, some fan fashion items “derive directly from a dominant discourse in the wider fandom” and are inspired by fan art and memes, not just the original text.[82] Jordandené offers shirts featuring quotes late night talk show host John Oliver said about Adam Driver such as, “Step on my throat, you rudely large man.” So, while they are Driver fan shirts, they require a knowledge of the fandom itself, within which the Oliver quotes became a meme. The

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[80] Jordan Ellis, phone interview, February 28, 2019.

[81] Jordan Ellis, phone interview, February 28, 2019.

[82] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 133.

brand also offers merchandise that says "Fake Geek Girl," commenting on the so-called "'war on fangirls' in which women are routinely derided for critiquing hegemonic media representations or calling for more diversity within the culture industries, or dismissed as 'fake geek girls'" in an attempt to silence them.[83] The design not only acknowledges this phenomenon but shuts it down by reclaiming the term and using it as a mode of community-building and fan identification, as if to say "yes, I am one of those 'fake geek girls' that wants more from my media." The desire to serve the niche interests of dedicated fans is a key principle underlying the design process of many unlicensed fan fashion designers.

As Affuso and Avi Santo point out, fan-made merchandise is about "filling in branded product gaps, engaging in commodity activist poaching activities, or offering a site of struggle over what constitutes authentic fandom."[84] By isolating subtle details and showing their familiarity with a text's "deep cuts," these designers legitimize their status as a real or authentic fan. For the designers, their labor is a way to "communicate to other fans one's own commitment to the text and to the fandom."[85] This recognition of a shared passion for the source material creates a feeling of belonging and understanding within the community and respect for the subcultural capital each member carries. As with costume designers, those most connected to the source material are likely to make the most authentic and accurate translations of it. And, as Jenkins suggests, "fans are the true experts."[86] In addition to serving a small but passionate customer base, unlicensed fan fashion designers'

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[83] Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*, 20.

[84] Elizabeth Affuso and Avi Santo, "Mediated Merchandise, Merchandisable Media: An Introduction," *Film Criticism* 42, no. 2 (2018): 4.3.

[85] Booth, "Framing Alterity," 2.1.

[86] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 86.

obscure references authenticate their fandom and act as a shared inside joke with other "real" fans.

Pre-existing fan knowledge is required to fully enjoy many unlicensed fan fashion products. They fill a niche and invite other fans into the process of poaching parts of the story and retelling them through clothing. Rice finds it "fun" to keep designs subtle and "weirdly niche," like the beanie they designed inspired by the movie *Annette* (2021, costume design by Pascaline Chavanne and Ursula Paredes Choto). The beanie is green, like one worn by Adam Driver's character in the film, and says "Ape of God" on it, pulling small details from different scenes that more casual viewers might not remember. But for those that recognize the references, "it feels like a little fan club."[87] Because the interpretive process of translating costume into clothing is so individual, other people familiar with the source material might not even get it. When someone does not recognize the reference, other members of the fan fashion community are happy to fill them in. Sharing interests and educating other fans provides everyone with the chance to learn something while building social cohesion within the fan community.[88] Botero describes her work differently depending on the situation, "because the non-geeks don't necessarily get it."[89] This marginal position as being outside the mainstream is "a key element in fans' search for authenticity" and an empowering way one "(re)claims ownership over one's identity and self."[90] Reinforcing their alterity is a way of reaffirming the integrity and legitimacy of their fan identity.

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[87] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

[88] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 159.

[89] Sandra Botero, Zoom interview, November 11, 2021.

[90] Booth, "Framing Alterity," 2.4.

Because brands do not have a license, they cannot use titles or character names to market the clothing. Instead, they use a code language to convey what the product's inspiration is while still respecting copyright. Campbell's work tends to be "closer to cosplay" than many other fan fashion brands, but she believes that she is safe as long as she is careful with her names and designs.[91] For example, her Hawkeye-inspired dress is called the Purple Archer Dress, referencing the color of Hawkeye's costume and his weapon of choice. Finding a way to describe unlicensed products without naming the IP is viewed as a fun challenge, just like avoiding copyright infringement during the design process. It is another element of translation and narrative play that designers get to engage in through their work. In addition to protecting unlicensed brands from cease-and-desists, using a code language helps connect brands with their desired audience of "authentic" fans. In the past, she has used Instagram to involve her customers in that process of play, posting new designs and asking followers to guess which character they are based on. In the most innocent way possible, it is also like a test of fandom—do you know enough to recognize the character?

While this shared language can reinforce a sense of community among fans, the obscure names of unlicensed fan fashions can make sales and marketing challenging, since not everyone is familiar with the code language each brand uses. For example, Elhoffer Design's *Star Wars*-inspired merchandise is called the Galactic Collection. While the connection is apparent, a new customer may not think to use the word "galactic" when searching for a Rey-inspired top on a search engine. This is an issue for brands releasing new products that do not already have access to a large customer base as well as fans looking for niche merchandise. At the same time, the necessity of seeking out and

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[91] Paige Campbell, phone interview, February 28, 2019.

uncovering these unlicensed products makes them appear more authentic and valuable. In Paul Booth's research on brick-and-mortar fan stores, he suggests that the necessity of "pilgrimage-like travel" to the outskirts of town to reach the store "magnifies the alterity of being outside mainstream taste cultures,"[92] and that the uniqueness of the items and sense of discovery in digging for them on the shelves furthers this positioning of fandom in opposition to the mainstream.[93] The same could be said for unlicensed fan fashion brands, who rely heavily on word-of-mouth. Because the designers are already members of the fan community, they have access to a pre-existing customer base that is typically more than happy to support and promote the creative endeavors of another fan.

BRAND VALUES

A common theme throughout this chapter is the unlicensed fan fashion industry's desire to fill gaps left by the licensed industry, which often fails to meet the needs of many women, non-binary, and queer fans in their product offerings, styles, and size ranges. Many unlicensed designers explicitly define their brands in opposition to mainstream licensed merchandise, speaking openly about the issues they see with the products and how they work to balance these shortcomings with their brands. The unlicensed fan fashion community is also committed to empowering women, non-binary, and queer fans through mentorships and collaborations, thus supporting Scott's claim that fan fashion provides a space "to challenge the androcentrism of the convergence culture industry."[94] This section explores some of the values shared by fan fashion designers, especially their focus on inclusivity and commitment to supporting other marginalized creators. I note how this

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[92] Booth, "Framing Alterity," 3.11.

[93] Booth, "Framing Alterity," 4.6.

[94] Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*, 185.

desire to support other creative laborers extends to their views on licensing as well, since these designers are much more likely to pursue licenses for small IP owned by the original creator rather than a large corporation. Independent fan fashion designers are committed to inclusivity, diversity, and supporting marginalized people not because it is trendy or they want to appeal to conscious consumers, but because they truly believe in these values and are able to integrate them into their brands.

INCLUSIVITY + DIVERSITY

Licensed fan fashion for women is often geared toward a specific type of idealized feminine consumer. Derek Johnson argues that licensed geek girl brands like Her Universe, "in ascribing greater legitimacy and visibility to the marginalized identities of young female fans… do so through their compatibility with postfeminist 'princess' narratives that enables continued popular embrace of aged and gendered heteronormativity."[95] Suzanne Scott has similarly argued that fangirl fashion "alternately challenges and reinforces androcentric conceptions of fan identity,"[96] while Elizabeth Affuso concurs that fan practices "often simultaneously reinforce gender divides" even as they "become more gender inclusive."[97] Unlicensed brands, on the other hand, offer a wider range of sizes and styles, catering to people who do not fit the narrow definition of femininity set by the licensed industry. They represent diversity not just in regards to size, gender, and age but also race, ethnicity, and sexuality through their models, collaborators, and team members.

Although many unlicensed brands were created to serve the geek girl community, they are also inclusive of non-binary and masc fans. Elhoffer Design uses women's sizing

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[95] Derek Johnson, "'May the Force Be with Katie': Pink Media Franchising and the Postfeminist Politics of *HerUniverse*," *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 6 (2014): 897.

[96] Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*, 197.

[97] Affuso, "Everyday Costume," 184.

and cuts but shows several products modeled by men and non-binary models. Rice is explicit that Stitchcrvft's clothes are "not gendered" and there for "anybody who wants it."[98] They shared a story of one of their first customers who was buying themselves Stitchcrvft's Regency Shirt as a gift to celebrate their top surgery. The customer wanted something that they could "feel nice in" and sent Rice a tearful video expressing their gratitude once they recovered and were able to try it on. For Rice, it was a reminder of why they choose to focus on creating for those who often feel excluded: "I was crying and I'm like, oh my God, this is so cool. This is why I wanna keep doing it."[99] Serving and supporting the LGBTQIA community is an important value shared among unlicensed fan fashion designers.

While the unlicensed industry may not subscribe to stereotypical ideas of femininity overall, but they also do not exclude anyone who might. Cherry discusses geek hierarchies and how the community internalizes outsider criticism, thus accusing other fans of being "too attached, too obsessed, too invested… such affect is criticized for being too girly or like a teen."[100] Booth similarly notes that fans self-discipline to avoid displaying "what they perceive as negative stereotypical traits."[101] Despite the fan fashion community's focus on subtle expressions of fandom through clothing, they embrace the idea of being able to "geek out loud"[102] and see nothing wrong with so-called feminine displays of fandom. It is not considered shameful or childish to be personally invested in fictional characters and their stories. In fact, Jordandené offers "Reylo Trash" t-shirts, poking fun at more critical *Star*

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[98] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

[99] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

[100] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 34.

[101] Booth, *Playing Fans*, 78.

[102] Samara Trindade, Zoom interview, July 20, 2021.

Wars fans' condescending attitude toward people who shipped Kylo Ren and Rey. In 2022, the brand started offering customized "Trash" shirts for every fandom. Similar to the "Fake Geek Girls" products, the "Trash" shirts allow fans to push back against criticisms of feminine fandom by owning the identity and shattering preconceived notions of what it means.

In addition to being accepting of all types of femininity and gender diversity, the unlicensed fan fashion community works to be inclusive of all types of bodies as well, especially since mass-produced products typically only cater to standard sizes or so-called "traditional" body types. Fashion design programs do not teach students how to design and create patterns for bigger bodies, which is partially why there are not many options out there for people above a women's size twelve. The options that do exist are often made of stretch material, which can be very comfortable, but sometimes people want something different and more structured. Although Her Universe offers extended sizing, their plus sizes are listed on a separate product page as the straight sizes, essentially "othering" people in bigger bodies. On the contrary, unlicensed fan fashion brands include all sizes on the same product page and do their best to include models wearing their largest size, which is typically a 3X or 4X. The smallest size Rice offered for Stitchcrvft's Romantics Collection was a size fourteen, which led to some pushback from people who were smaller and wanted to support Stitchcrvft. However, Rice stood fast on their conviction to focus on underserved sizes, pointing to the fact that there are plenty of similar options in standard sizes on Etsy for a fair price, but larger sizes usually cost more and are lower quality.[103] Heroicouture offers up to a 3X, but Botero is "happy to custom make it for them at no extra charge" if

[103] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

somebody needs a larger size.[104] These designers acknowledge how frustrating and alienating it can feel to not find clothing in your size and want to make sure that nobody feels excluded from fan fashion.

Mainstream licensed merchandise also tends to skew toward a younger crowd, whereas many unlicensed fan fashion designers are in their thirties or older and speak to their age group. Through my research and living in the Los Angeles area, I have connected with many adults who are active in fandoms, especially Disney. For years, Disney focused the majority of their licensed clothing on childrenswear. Even when clothes are available outside the children's section, they are often in junior's sizes and the designs are geared toward young women. The desire to serve adult fans was a key factor motivating Botero to start Heroicouture. When Her Universe and Hot Topic started offering fan fashion in the early 2010s, Botero was happy to see it but felt that it "wasn't really age appropriate per se," at least not the way that she wanted to dress as a woman in her forties. Her goal is to offer "something a little bit more sophisticated" than the licensed merchandise industry.[105] Unlicensed fan fashion designers are adamant that fandom is for all ages and all people.

COLLABORATION & SUPPORT

An emphasis on community over competition pervades the fan fashion industry. Veterans in the industry are happy to share tips and trade secrets with emerging designers, since they are all part of the fan community. Unlicensed designers will also collaborate with one another on giveaways and products, sharing customers and helping to build one another's Instagram followings. They believe in paying it forward and will help out others in the geek community whenever possible. Uplifting independent creatives and entrepreneurs

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[104] Sandra Botero, Zoom interview, November 11, 2021.

[105] Sandra Botero, phone interview, February 27, 2019.

within and outside of the fan community is an important value shared by unlicensed fan fashion designers. Rather than seeing other brands as competition, unlicensed fan fashion designers support, uplift, and promote their fellow independent brand owners.

Men have historically been the most successful at professionalizing their fan labor, in part because "masculine" fan practices like game modding and fan filmmaking are considered more viable for the commercial market.[106] When women are able to professionalize their fan labor, it is often not as well received.[107] Fangirls attempting to professionalize are held to different, harsher standards than "their fanboy counterparts, who are rarely interrogated about their capacity to professionalize their labor."[108] However, as with costume design, the gendering of fashion as female actually creates an entry point for women into a male-dominated field. Thus, the majority of fan fashion designers are women and non-binary people who have successfully transitioned their geeky hobby into a business with the help of their community, which provides "a refuge from the competitiveness of male fan communities."[109] Botero, like most other independent fan fashion designers, is "very much one of these women who wants to help other women… In helping others, you're also helping yourself."[110] This focus on supporting and uplifting other women is not unlike the discussion in Chapter 1 about costume designers mentoring newcomers in the industry.

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[106] De Kosnik, "Should Fan Fiction Be Free?," 120-121.

[107] Suzanne Scott, "'Cosplay Is Serious Business': Gendering Material Fan Labor on *Heroes of Cosplay*," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 148.

[108] Scott, "'Cosplay Is Serious Business,'" 148.

[109] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 35.

[110] Sandra Botero, phone interview, February 27, 2019.

Members of the fan fashion community are generally very supportive of emerging designers—mentoring them, offering advice, and sharing resources. Rather than seeing one another as competition, these fan designers bond over their mutual interest in fan fashion, and more experienced designers are happy to pass down what they have learned to newcomers. In Henry Jenkins' discussion of fan vidders, he states that they want it to "remain a communal artform that originates within and speaks to the particular interests of fandom" rather than being exclusive to a small number of people who have the experience and means to master the form.[111] This is partially whey fan fashion designers are so encouraging of one another—they would rather see how other fans express their fandom through clothing than encourage competition. In addition to running her own fan fashion brand, Elhoffer spent years designing licensed apparel and knows the market well. When Quasar Creations officially started taking orders in January 2019, Elhoffer offered Campbell advice on how to grow the business, market unlicensed fashion, and avoid licensing issues. This included advising Campbell to stay away from a company's IP for a few years if she ever received a cease-and-desist, because the people that send the letters supposedly cycle out every three years or so.[112] The accuracy of this statement is debatable, but it is interesting that this is the type of trade secret being shared. Unlicensed fan fashion designers enjoy sharing what they have learned and guiding emerging designers through the complications of designing fan fashion without a license.

Even fans working in the licensed merchandise industry will help out unlicensed fan fashion designers, especially those who are interested in seeking licensing and/or serving part of the community that is completely overlooked by the licensed industry. Allison

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[111] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 248.

[112] Paige Campbell, phone interview, February 28, 2019.

Cimino, CEO and designer of licensed brand RockLove Jewelry, has been a great resource for Ellis and other fan creators interested in eventually securing licenses.[113] At a fan fashion panel at New York Comic-Con, Botero struck up a conversation about Heroicouture with a woman who complimented her dress and turned out to be Theresa Mercado, Vice President of Product Development for Licensed Apparel and Fashion at Hot Topic, BoxLunch, and Her Universe. They agreed that while the brands Mercado represented were great, "they don't cater to anything for us," meaning middle-aged and older women.[114] Mercado has been a "wonderful" mentor to Botero, offering direction on pursuing licenses and advice on how to grow the brand, like using Instagram instead of Facebook.[115] While the intervention of someone from outside the unlicensed community raises questions regarding the potential for cultivation and co-optation, Botero believes that people are merely seeing the benefit in sticking together: "This is a very unique community… how many years were geeks and nerds ostracized? And now we're mainstream. So, we should celebrate each other."[116]

In addition to mentorships, fan fashion designers support other brands by promoting them on their Instagram accounts and collaborating with them on products and giveaways. Instagram is to fan fashion what Ravelry is to fan handicrafting—a platform that "facilitates the micro-economy… by offering opportunities for micro-businesses to advertise to niche markets of like-minded fans."[117] In July 2018, Jordandené and Elhoffer Design joined forces for a BB-8 style giveaway with fan fashion brands Gold Bubble Clothing, run by Victoria

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[113] Jordan Ellis, phone interview, February 28, 2019.

[114] Sandra Botero, phone interview, February 27, 2019.

[115] Sandra Botero, phone interview, February 27, 2019.

[116] Sandra Botero, phone interview, February 27, 2019.

[117] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 166.

Schmidt and Jinyo of *Heroes of Cosplay* (2013-2014), and Sent from Mars, Mari Cole's geeky accessories line. The promotion brought each brand "a ton of followers… 'cause while everyone's a fan of everyone, not necessarily everyone follows everyone."[118] The ability to tag other accounts and share their public posts to one's own Instagram story aids the word-of-mouth advertising on which independent brands rely. Not only is it a good way to drive traffic to other brands' pages, but it ensures that everyone is credited and "makes us feel more collaborative."[119] The focus on collaboration in the unlicensed fan fashion community led Ellis and her college best friend, Elizabeth Crowder, to found *Sartorial Geek*, a magazine, blog, and podcast designed to "bring everyone in the industry together."[120] Ellis and Crowder do photo shoots that feature a variety of brands, sponsor fan fashion challenges on Instagram, interview geeky creators on their podcast, and invite members of the geek girl community to contribute to the magazine on topics that they love. Unlicensed fan fashion designers want to ensure other independent creators get their due.

The desire to support independent creators affects unlicensed fan fashion designers' approaches to licensing as well. Some designers refuse to make products for certain IP without a license out of respect for the creators. For example, Elhoffer would love to do a collection inspired by *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019, costume design by Melina Root) but respects series creator Rachel Bloom "far too much to just release some stuff… I would want to do it officially, if possible."[121] For unlicensed designers, there is a difference between using IP owned by an independent creator or production company versus IP owned by a big

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[118] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, March 12, 2019.

[119] Jordan Ellis, phone interview, February 28, 2019.

[120] Jordan Ellis, phone interview, February 28, 2019.

[121] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, March 12, 2019.

media corporation like Marvel. The week of the virtual San Diego Comic-Con in 2020, Ellis and Elhoffer went live on the *Sartorial Geek* Instagram page to discuss licensing and shared that they only want licenses where the creators benefit directly. Jordandené, for example, has licenses with authors V.E. Schwab, Sarah MacLean, Mackenzi Lee, and Sam Maggs, who own their own IP and therefore benefit directly from the licensing fees. As discussed in Chapter 1, profits from licensing ultimately benefit IP owners, not creatives. Botero in particular expressed her desire to collaborate with the original costume designer if she was designing a licensed collection. She thinks it is a "no brainer" that they be involved with adapting their costume designs into everyday fashions, since it is fair and "can only enhance" the finished product.[122] Unlicensed fan fashion designers would rather see other creatives profit than media executives who had no hand in creating the IP.

While the inclusivity of the unlicensed fan fashion community forms a significant contrast with the licensed industry, there is still room for growth, particularly with supporting BIPOC-owned brands and representing BIPOC characters with their products. Regardless of whether it is explicit favoritism or due to not knowing any BIPOC-owned brands (which is a problem in and of itself), it is clear that there is still some work to be done. Rice, a Black non-binary person, finds that the sub-section of the geek community that they interact with regularly are inclusive and diverse but has seen some issues in the larger geek "fashion and creative community" and especially in the fandoms themselves.[123] While people seem to care and want to help, many people often speak up when there is a crisis or some reminder of the issues marginalized people face regularly but go silent shortly after and are not putting in the work to make real change. These brands are "generally run

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[122] Sandra Botero, Zoom interview, November 11, 2021.

[123] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

white people who probably either don't wanna step on toes or don't know how to navigate it, which is understandable," but there are also so many resources available these days for self-educating on racism and people need to follow through and put in the work.[124] However, BIPOC creators feel hopeful that with continued advocacy and education, change can happen quickly in the small unlicensed community. Although the community is certainly not utopian, the need for inclusivity is a value many share and are continually working toward, whereas achieving true diversity of thought and representation in a corporate environment has been a seemingly never-ending battle.

While most people in the fan fashion community are more than willing to help out newcomers, some designers are "very guarded" and "not very open to communicating."[125] However, as Jenkins points out, this type of "Noncommunal behavior is read negatively, as a violation of the social contract that binds fans together."[126] Those who are unwilling to support other independent creators are the exception rather than the rule. There will inevitably be some tension and competition among people making similar products for the same customer base, but the majority of unlicensed fan fashion designers prioritize the community over profits. They are willing to share customers and do not have grounds for infighting about products, since "no one owns anything"[127] and they're "all stealing from the same IP."[128] Many unlicensed designers belong to the same fandoms and know there will inevitably be others in the community who have the same ideas. When Rice and Ellis

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[124] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

[125] Sandra Botero, phone interview, February 27, 2019.

[126] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 282.

[127] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

[128] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, March 12, 2019.

designed similar t-shirts, they both bought one another's designs. Because unlicensed fan fashion is more focused on community than profits, brands are able to support one another without fear or animosity. As long as cool stuff is being made for nerdy people, everyone is happy.

THE GIFT OF FAN FASHION

Now that we have a better sense of the culture and community surrounding unlicensed fan fashion, we can consider how these principles and values remain aligned with fandom's gift culture ethos. As I have shown, unlicensed brands have found a way to "cheat the system" and commodify fan production while keeping the power and profits within the fan community. Money is exchanged, of course, so fan fashion is not a gift in the simplest sense of the word, but the money is a necessary outcome of these makers and fans operating within a capitalist system. Ultimately, these transactions are more about community building, sharing the love of fandom, and finding a tangible connection to characters and the story world. Thus, unlicensed fan fashion is an authentic, non-commercial fan-run industry that remains true to the ethos of fandom's gift culture. As Suzanne Scott points out, scholarship on online gift economies has shown the unfeasibility of "engag[ing] with gift economies and commodity culture as disparate systems." However, while Scott's article is concerned with the industry "appropriating the gift economy's ethos for its own economic gain,"[129] here, I am interested in how a gift culture appropriates a commercial model while resisting commodity culture's ethos.

[129] Suzanne Scott, "Repackaging Fan Culture: The Regifting Economy of Ancillary Content Models," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 3 (2009): 1.1.

DEFINING A GIFT [CULTURE]

To consider whether or not something operates as a gift culture, we should establish what constitutes a "gift." At its most basic, a gift is something given willingly to someone else. However, the concept of a gift is a bit more complicated than that. One of the key characteristics of a gift is that it circulates. Karen Hellekson discusses three elements related to the gift being to give, to receive, and to reciprocate.[130] Marcel Mauss has discussed the role of gifts at length and how the obligations to give, receive, and return form the basic structure of some Polynesian societies, like the Maori.[131] Thus, while there may not be direct payment for something, it always comes back around somehow. Consider a holiday like Christmas, where people exchange gifts with one another. Ultimately the monetary value balances out, but that is irrelevant anyway. Christmas gifts are not just about trading goods. They are about celebrating tradition (religious or simply familial), reinforcing relationships, sharing interests, and bringing people together. A gift is exchanged for the gift of reaction, which is exchanged for the gift of social solidarity.[132] The circulation of gifts within a group "leaves a series of interconnected relationships in its wake, and a kind of decentralized cohesiveness emerges."[133] The exchange of the gift becomes a shared experience among everyone in the network. Rachael Sabotini explains that "if the gift giving ends, community ends, since the focus of the community is the gift giving itself."[134]

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[130] Karen Hellekson, "A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (Summer 2009): 114.

[131] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, 2002).

[132] Hellekson, "A Fannish Field of Value," 116.

[133] Hyde, *The Gift*, xxxvi.

[134] Sabotini, "The Fannish Potlatch."

So, a gift is not necessarily a "thing" but something of personal value beyond the monetary value of the gift. A gift is "what we make of it."[135] Ultimately, it is something that makes us feel. Hyde speaks of a gift as something that can "revive the soul" and "irresistibly moves us."[136] It is intangible, emotional, personal, and social. When we feel a personal connection to something, even if we paid to experience it, we receive something in return that has nothing to do with money, for "a gift revives the soul… we are grateful that the artist lived, grateful that he labored in the service of his gifts."[137] Part of what makes a gift personal is that the creator (or giver) gives part of themselves with it. Furthermore, the presence of the gift allows someone to show it off, tell the story of how they got it, and who they plan to give it to, which "forms one of the favorite subjects of tribal conversation and gossip" and thus aids social connection.[138] Basically, the object carries a story with it and therefore has more value than a commodity. Fan fashion, for instance, is not just a shirt or a dress—it is a conversation starter, a memory, and a keepsake to pass on.

The fan community creates and reinforces itself through the exchange of gifts. Sabotini likens fan culture to the potlatches held by Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest, where status is not obtained through wealth or possessions but through the creation of "feast" objects and gifting. Sabotini argues that fan gatherings, email lists, chats, etc. are a "fannish equivalent." Fans that make original work, like art and fanfic, are granted the highest status, as these gifts are considered the most valuable.[139] Stephen Chen and

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[135] Hyde, *The Gift*, xxxiii.

[136] Hyde, *The Gift*, xxxix, 33.

[137] Hyde, *The Gift*, xxxiii.

[138] Hyde, *The Gift*, 15.

[139] Sabotini, "The Fannish Potlatch."

Chong Ju Choi echo the idea that gifts can "serve a social function such as creating or confirming status within a society."[140] Despite the varying levels of subcultural capital held by members of the fan community, fan celebrities generally reciprocate the support they receive to an extent, "thus eliding hierarchy."[141] In discussing one handicrafter who received attention for a scarf based on the wallpaper from *Sherlock* (2010-2017), Cherry notes that she did not seek the status of fan celebrity, despite achieving it, but was instead seeking attention for "her art and her work to be recognized."[142] Fan creators often measure success based on what they can give back to the community. Hyde contrasts the "European view" that wealth is about social rank and personal virtue, "to possess is to be great," with the "Native view" that wealth is expected to be shared and distributed, "*to possess is to give*."[143] This is not unlike the difference between IP owners, who want to accumulate wealth, and fans, who believe they should share it. Susan Scafidi and Jeff Trexler argue that fashion is also a gift culture, as "giving each other products and perks is an ubiquitous means of connecting" within the fashion world.[144] The gift of fan fashion is not necessarily the clothing but the emotions it generates and the connections it creates.

Fan fashion designers perform their identity through their creative labor and infuse themselves into the objects they create, thus giving them something beyond their monetary value and making them gifts. "Affect is… [the] distinguishing characteristic" that sets fan-

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[140] Stephen Chen and Chong Ju Choi, "A Social Exchange Perspective on Business Ethics: An Application to Knowledge Exchange," *Journal of Business Ethics* 62, no. 1 (2005): 3.

[141] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 164.

[142] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 110.

[143] Hyde, *The Gift*, 18.

[144] Susan Scafidi and Jeff Trexler, "O Aspecto Ético da Moda," in *Moda, Luxo e Direito*, ed. Susy Inés. Bello Knoll, André Mendes Espirito Santo, and Pamela Echeverría (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: ELDIAL.COM, 2016), 85.

made merchandise apart from the commodities sold by licensed brands.[145] As discussed earlier in this chapter, unlicensed geek fashion designers will go out of their way to ensure that customers are satisfied, and doing so brings them personal joy. If someone has a Stitchcrvft garment in need of repair, Ren will pay for them to ship it back and fix the item for free. They not only want to ensure that customers are happy but also hope to "reduce waste" by increasing the longevity of garments and asking people to send back items that they no longer wear to be resold or repurposed.[146] If their customer base was larger, it would be impossible to maintain that level of individualized customer service or oversight over the production process. So, not only are they able to offer better customer service but higher quality garments as well. Independent, unlicensed designers can merge personal values with their brands and maintain personal connections with their customers, creating a level of brand loyalty that is difficult to achieve with a large, corporate brand. Elhoffer believes "there's no ethical consumption under capitalism" and occasionally worries that she is contributing to the problems she is trying to fight against.[147] At the same time, she sees an opportunity to "keep being a game changer" and, like many other unlicensed designers, keeps her brand focused on people, not profits.[148] Elhoffer's comments exemplify the tension between entrepreneurial ideas and rebellious subcultures that are characteristic of neoliberal ideology and Web 2.0 culture.[149]

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[145] Kristina Busse, "Fan Labor and Feminism: Capitalizing on the Fannish Labor of Love," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 114.

[146] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

[147] Catherine Elhoffer, Zoom interview, November 11, 2021.

[148] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, March 12, 2019.

[149] Marwick, *Status Update*, 24.

In the unlicensed fan fashion community, clothes are imbued with meaning by the creator and speak to the consumer on a personal level, providing them with a means of expressing themselves and their creativity. Even when the clothing does not necessarily look like a character's costume or there is no role-playing involved, media-inspired merchandise "allows for an exploration/expression of self through the filmic reference."[150] For many fan fashion lovers, like Samara Trindade, this mode of self-expression provides "a sense of pride in what I have and what I put on" and becomes an outlet for creativity. They enjoy putting thought into every detail of their outfits and feel validated when others notice, because their thought and creativity are being appreciated. Mainstream licensed merchandise is often seen as cliché or childish, whereas contemporary fan fashion, especially the products from unlicensed brands, are considered more age-appropriate and easily integrated into one's personal style.[151] As fan fashion lover Anika Guldstrand explains, "you feel more like yourself" when wearing fan fashion.[152] Because fans can express their true selves and their creativity, fan fashion makes them happy. Guldstrand referred to it as the "bliss of really liking what you're wearing."[153]

As discussed in Chapter 2, fan fashion enables people to share an intimate, tangible connection with the stories and characters they love, which can be therapeutic. "Rereading is central to the fan's aesthetic pleasure,"[154] and fan fashion allows them to reread constantly, in a sense. They can inhabit the story world through clothing. Many people use

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[150] Affuso and Santo, "Mediated Merchandise," 3.4.

[151] Janine Jones, Zoom interview, August 4, 2021.

[152] Anika Guldstrand, Zoom interview, August 3, 2021.

[153] Anika Guldstrand, Zoom interview, August 3, 2021.

[154] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 69.

fandom as a coping mechanism. The fictional worlds provide an escape from the stress and challenges of everyday life. Like fan tourism, fan fashion makes possible "a radically different object-relationship in terms of immediacy, embodiment and somatic sensation,"[155] because it is physical and part of lived experience. Fan fashion can provide a sense of comfort and security by allowing people to draw on the characters' strengths and the values associated with the fandom. For Jones and many other fan fashion lovers, wearing fan fashion inspired by a specific character means representing and internalizing that characters' values and enacting a sort of internal performance. Especially for people who have suffered trauma, they can find comfort in watching characters experience similar situations and triumph. It makes them feel that their "story is going to end up okay too."[156] Feeling comfortable in one's clothing and drawing strength from the fandom can relieve anxiety, particularly surrounding social situations. One does not have to be uncertain about finding something in common with another person wearing fandom-inspired clothing. Fan fashion gives people a way to present as their authentic selves and "geek out loud."[157] If someone recognizes their outfit, "then it's like, yes, you get it. You get me."[158]

The unlicensed fan fashion community is a safe space where marginalized fans can feel more comfortable participating in fandom without judgment, make friends, and strengthen existing friendships. Some women have been excluded from participating in fandom or have not had good experiences with fandoms in the past, so finding a judgment-

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[155] Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 149.

[156] Janine Jones, Zoom interview, August 4, 2021.

[157] Samara Trindade, Zoom interview, July 20, 2021.

[158] Sandra Botero, Zoom interview, November 11, 2021.

free community of other people with similar experiences can be a "significant pleasure."[159] That feeling of inclusion is a big part of what draws marginalized fans to smaller fandom communities, like the one surrounding fan fashion. Not only is fandom often a boys' club, but it can also be seen as childish by outsiders. However, I have connected with many designers and consumers in their thirties and older that have started to feel accepted and make friends thanks to fan fashion. Trindade and others have created "friend groups that I very much love and appreciate, because we have that foundation of appreciation each other's interests and respecting each other's fandoms."[160] The things that make people feel like outsiders with other friends are the basis for their friendship with other fans in the fan fashion community, so it feels good to be fully accepted as one's true and authentic self.

Fan fashion is not just a mode of expressing oneself or connecting with a character, it is also a way to connect with other people. Like other forms of fan art, it is ultimately less about the creation itself than "the sense of community it generates."[161] When someone recognizes a subtle design as representative of a beloved character, the shared knowledge creates a bond. It is something personal and feels "like a little special secret" between those who style fan fashion outfits and the fans who can appreciate all the little details.[162] Fans wearing fan fashion might find themselves walking a bit taller and observing the people around them in public, trying to see if anyone else shares their interests. Janine Jones says, "it's almost like a beacon" calling out to see if anyone else identifies with the character or the

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[159] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 66.

[160] Samara Trindade, Zoom interview, July 20, 2021.

[161] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 268.

[162] Samara Trindade, Zoom interview, July 20, 2021.

fandom represented in her outfit.[163] Those social benefits are an essential part of what makes fan fashion a gift. According to Lewis Hyde, the fundamental property of a gift is that it "*must always move.*"[164] Thus, sharing the gift with others through conversations and social media posts is an essential part of fan fashion's gift culture.

In social situations, fan fashion makes it easy to find common ground and sparks friendships that are different from those that do not revolve around a shared love of fandom. Guldstrand, for example, explains how she has "work friends" but wants "more nerd friends" and has therefore become very active in the fan fashion community on Instagram.[165] As Hyde explains, "what moves us, beyond the gift itself, is the promise (or the fact) of transformation, friendship, and love."[166] Whether someone is presenting themselves in fan fashion online or in real life, it serves as "a secret call to your people" and a mode of finding an inclusive community of like-minded individuals in a world that is not always kind to women and other marginalized fans.[167] These friendships are often formed through cosplay, bounding, and fan fashion challenges on Instagram, which typically include a list of prompts and/or themes that participants use for outfit inspiration on specific days. Participants post images of themselves using the challenge's hashtag. By following the hashtag, fans find other participants and become friends by liking and commenting on one another's posts. Personally, I have made many connections through the Sartorial Geek Fashion Fix challenge, which has created a friendly and supportive community on

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[163] Janine Jones, Zoom interview, August 4, 2021.

[164] Hyde, *The Gift*, 4.

[165] Anika Guldstrand, Zoom interview, August 3, 2021.

[166] Hyde, *The Gift*, 89.

[167] Anika Guldstrand, Zoom interview, August 3, 2021.

Instagram. Participants are quick to follow one another's accounts and are generous with their comments admiring other people's outfits and creative photo edits. Trindade and Jones, who are sisters, have collaborated on some Fashion Fix posts together and find it "really fun cheering each other along."[168] Having a post reshared by another community member feels especially good, knowing that "what I did was worthy enough of a reshare."[169] It is a sense of pride one gets in seeing their creativity appreciated by others, similar to that felt by designers getting positive feedback from customers.

COMMODIFYING THE GIFT

Abigail De Kosnik argues that fan fiction writers should commodify their work before an outsider does and the work is "corrupted or deformed by its entry into the commercial sphere."[170] While it is too late to stop the commercialization of fan goods, fan-creators can stave off total corruption and reclaim some power (and profit) from the media industry by starting their own businesses that skirt the licensing process and avoid paying out to IP owners. Karen Hellekson believes women should profit from fan labor but that "the ways to profit tend not to be legitimized by the fannish group, which remains a gift culture."[171] However, Hellekson's concern was with outside corporations providing the platform for fans to profit from their fan production, specifically fan fiction. For Hellekson, AO3 was the only platform that was truly fan-based, because it did not police content or try to make a profit. It merely provided a space for fans to monetize their work and maintain control over it. Similarly, in the case of unlicensed fan fashion, the gift and the profits stay within the fan

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[168] Samara Trindade, Zoom interview, July 20, 2021.

[169] Janine Jones, Zoom interview, August 4, 2021.

[170] De Kosnik, "Should Fan Fiction Be Free?," 123.

[171] Hellekson, "Making Use Of," 126.

community, refusing to allow outsiders or copyright holders into the conversation. In comparison to licensed merchandise, where the bulk of the proceeds go to the studio and executives rather than the original costume designers or the clothing/goods designers, the proceeds of unlicensed merchandise go to other fans and the (usually smaller) factories that they work with.

Although the unlicensed industry has adopted a commercial model out of necessity, unlicensed brands are anti-commercial in that they adhere to the values of fandom's gift culture. Like the semiprofessional fanzine publishers and vid distributors Jenkins discusses, unlicensed fan fashion brands "originate within the fan community and reflect a desire to achieve a better circulation of its cultural products."[172] Designers are more focused on sharing their fandom and providing other fans with a mode of self-expression than they are with profits. Money is exchanged, of course, so fan fashion is not a gift in the simplest sense of the word, but the money is a necessary outcome of these makers and fans operating within a capitalist system. It is a form of "making do."[173] People are all merely "actor[s] in the marketplace," so it is near impossible to maintain a job that is "pure" gift labor.[174] Fans understand that tangible creations cannot be given away. Materials cost money, creation takes time, and the artist has to survive. I would argue that the normalization of the gig economy has made fans much more accepting of monetizing fan labor.[175] When freelance work is normalized and people are applauded for following their passions, creating a business out of a personal interest seems like an obvious move.

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[172] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 280.

[173] McRobbie, *Be Creative*, 23.

[174] Hyde, *The Gift*, 139.

[175] McRobbie notes a similar "break with past anti-commercial notions of being creative" among young people in the second wave UK culture industries in *Be Creative*.

Because there is so much transparency from unlicensed fan fashion brands and a direct, personal connection between designers and consumers—most fan fashion consumers have a basic understanding of how their production process works and the various costs that go into it. Indeed, many fans are even willing to pay more for something specifically because it is fandom-inspired. Rice admitted that their experience as a designer affected their attitude as a consumer. The realization that unlicensed fan fashion designers were doing things like pressing each shirt by themselves in their homes made Rice appreciate how much work goes into it and become more willing to pay higher prices to independent creators. Fan fashion lover Samara Trindade echoed that sentiment, admitting that she is more willing to pay higher prices for products from small businesses than larger brands that will eventually put their items on sale, like Her Universe, Hot Topic, or Box Lunch.[176] With unlicensed fan fashion, consumers know they are not just paying for the garment but supporting a fellow fan and current or potential friend. Doing so makes them happy, on top of the happiness they receive from the clothes themselves.

Unlicensed fan fashion designers use their "micro-businesses" to "convert fan cultural capital into economic capital," just like the handicrafters on Ravelry. In other words, the community connections they have as a result of being a high-status fan are used to create a customer base and word-of-mouth advertising.[177] Designers turn that economic capital back into fan cultural capital, as they create new social connections through their brand and raise their status within the fan community. Knowing someone personally makes people more likely to patronize their business, not just because they want to show support for their friend but because they know the person's values and assume that will transfer to

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[176] Samara Trindade, Zoom interview, July 20, 2021.

[177] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 164.

the brand. The shared fandoms and direct engagement on social media facilitate personal connections among fan-designers and fan fashion consumers, both drawing on and reinforcing the fan fashion community. Despite Terranova's belief that "the potlatch and the economy ultimately remain irreconcilable,"[178] the unlicensed fan fashion industry exemplifies this type of hybridized, mixed economy.

The personal and emotional nature of fan fashion makes the clothes more than commodities. Fan fashion designers acknowledge consumers on a personal level, creating an emotional connection between designer and consumer and among consumers who celebrate the objects together. As Lewis Hyde explains, "the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange [is] that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection."[179] Unlicensed fan fashion designers "geek out" with their customers as fellow fans, which makes sales feel more like bonding with the fan community than mere commercial transactions.[180] After establishing a gift relationship with nature, "we tend to respond to nature as part of ourselves, not as a stranger or alien available for exploitation."[181] Because unlicensed fan fashion designers offer a gift whose value far exceeds its monetary cost, they earn respect and goodwill among their customers.

Thanks to the active online spaces Elhoffer has cultivated, she and her team know their customers on an individual level and vice versa. Elhoffer Design's Essentials collection includes several products named after employees, including the Susan Shell and Vanessa

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[178] Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (2000): 36.

[179] Hyde, *The Gift*, 72.

[180] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 171.

[181] Hyde, *The Gift*, 34.

Top. In February 2022, the brand hosted a social media challenge using the hashtag #PSILoveElhoffer that encouraged people to style daily outfits using Elhoffer Design clothing. As announced on the Elhoffer Design Discord, the outfits were meant to be "a little 'thank you note' or a 'love letter' to our team members" and should be inspired by the Elhoffer Design piece named after them, "something their [sic] into, a favorite color, an homage to a convo you've had with them." Although the announcement points to the "Meet the Team" Instagram highlight for anyone who needs inspiration, the expectation was that true Starpuffs (the nickname for loyal Elhoffer Design customers) would already have an existing personal relationship with the Elhoffer team members from which to draw inspiration for the challenge. For newer customers, the challenge provided an opportunity to start building those personal connections to the employees and the brand.

As I have shown, unlicensed fan fashion brands work to fill gaps left by the licensed industry and offer more unique and customizable ways to express one's fandom. The result is a customer base that is immensely appreciative of the designers on a personal level. That gratitude is the gift the customers return to the brands. Fan fashion consumers share their happiness with the brands and one another on social media, creating emotional connections that exist outside the sales transactions and make fans more likely to buy from their brands. Trindade and her friends will share on social media about brands they like, buy matching products, and take photos together. For fan fashion lovers, it is all about creating and strengthening bonds. The giving, receiving, and reciprocating of positive emotions, support, and validation between fan fashion designers and consumers aligns with the ethos of a gift culture, as a sense of community is valued above all else. The clothes are merely "an extension of that community."[182]

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[182] Anika Guldstrand, Zoom interview, August 3, 2021.

Sabotini notes that fanfic writers tend to be insecure, but "the reinforcement by the community makes it easier to deal with the discipline of constant production."[183] That is another gift that the community gives back to the high-status fans or creators. Elhoffer's big break came in August 2016 when Elhoffer Design released the Badger sweater, which became very popular among the geek girl community and was shared widely on social media. The profits enabled her to develop her business: "I've been able to invest purely because my customers invested in me."[184] This is not just about people buying her products or finances; she sees their purchases as an investment in her. Their purchases represent confidence in Elhoffer's talent, appreciation for her creative labor, and validation of her as a designer and fan. When the professional is personal, getting positive feedback on the brand translates to positive feedback about one's self.

THE "GIFT" OF FAN LABOR

I have argued that the unlicensed fan fashion industry operates as a gift culture and has the potential to offer personal and social benefits to members of the community that surrounds it. However, as is the case with most fan labor, the "most substantial rewards" go to those who own the intellectual property.[185] IP owners are aware that the unlicensed fan fashion industry exists and are familiar with some of the larger brands, like Elhoffer Design, yet they do not try to shut them down. Instead, they exploit the labor generated by the unlicensed industry. While some companies give out "profoundly mixed signals" about their views on fan production,[186] the savviest have realized that they can profit off fan labor. After

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[183] Sabotini, "The Fannish Potlatch."

[184] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, March 12, 2019.

[185] Ross, "In Search of the Lost Paycheck," 19.

[186] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 142.

all, as Mel Stanfill points out, the industry only loosens up its restrictions because "there is money to be made."[187] If IP owners go after smaller brands, they will "shut down or hide their activities rather than stand their ground," because they cannot fight a large corporation.[188] The approval or disapproval of copyright owners does not matter much to fans; it only seems to affect how willing fans are to share their work,[189] and IP owners can only benefit from their labor if it is shared. As Paul Booth states: "Our creative work is used to sell products and services. Our clicks become capital. We are commoditized from and marketed to."[190] The community-building interactions that make unlicensed fan fashion a gift become free labor for the licensed industry and IP owners. So, the industry does not try to quash these brands, they reach out to them, utilize them, take their gift and turn it into a commodity.

ADVERTISING & BUZZ

In addition to creating products, designers promote films and TV series on their social media pages and in their everyday conversations as they share their fandom with others. Unlicensed fan fashion designers essentially turn their customers into walking billboards for the media industry. As Alexis Lothian points out in her work on vidding, "crafted costumes and other objects show the labor of fannish hands as both self-expression and free advertising."[191] So, the labor of unlicensed fan fashion designers doubles as a form

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[187] Mel Stanfill, "Spinning Yarn With Borrowed Cotton," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 137.

[188] Rebecca Tushnet, "Payment in Credit: Copyright Law and Subcultural Creativity," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 70 (Spring 2007): 142.

[189] Tushnet, "Payment in Credit," 149.

[190] Booth, *Playing Fans*, 1.

[191] Alexis Lothian. "A Different Kind of Love Song: Vidding Fandom's Undercommons," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 141.

of personal fulfillment and free labor for IP owners. Terranova states that, for art forms like fashion and music, "it is a form of collective cultural labor that makes these products possible even as the profit is disproportionately appropriated by established corporations."[192] Things do not become trendy or popular just because a company pushes them, it requires people to buy, promote, share, and take on the labor of making something into a cultural phenomenon while IP owners benefit.

Indeed, the industry is becoming conscious of the free labor they can exploit from fans and "dependent on active and committed consumers to spread the word about valued properties in an overcrowded media marketplace."[193] This is especially true for Disney lifestylers or influencers with a strong social media presence,[194] like Tiffany Mink, founder and former CEO of unlicensed geek fashion brand Whosits & Whatsits.[195] She has worked with Disney as an influencer, sharing sponsored content to her 28,000 YouTube subscribers and 48,000 Instagram followers. In fact, many people discovered Whosits & Whatsits through her other channels. Thus, her sponsored content for Disney indirectly promoted her unlicensed Disney products. Due to their working relationship, some people at Disney were likely aware of the Disney-inspired t-shirts Mink designed while at Whosits & Whatsits but never served the company a cease and desist. Without speaking with someone at Disney, who probably would not be able to say anything anyway, we cannot know for sure what kept Mink's company safe. However, it is not difficult to conclude that at least one reason was that, in sharing her own fandom and disseminating her unlicensed products, Mink also

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[192] Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor," in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, ed. Trebor Scholz (New York: Routledge, 2013), 41.

[193] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 138.

[194] Williams, *Theme Park Fandom*, 200.

[195] Tiffany Mink left the company in 2019 and now works in the licensed fan merchandise industry.

promoted Disney and its sub-brands. After all, Disney invited Elhoffer and her team to the *Captain Marvel* film premiere specifically because of the dress she designed, even though it was technically competing with products from their licensors like Her Universe. Disney seems to understand one of the basic characteristics of fandom's gift culture: "Many people talking about a gift make it seem more valuable; therefore it *is* more valuable, no matter what the objective quality."[196]

Conversations on Discord, Instagram, and Facebook create and maintain buzz for movies and series while also providing data about what consumers are interested in and what type of products they want. Tiziana Terranova explains that while "excess productive activities," like Facebook comments and Instagram posts, are "pleasurably embraced," they can also be "shamelessly exploited."[197] Through the close-knit geek girl community of which they are active participants, independent fan fashion designers have direct access to the market, thus their social media pages have the potential for exploitation. You can see what customers are requesting, what designs are working and what is not, even what type of prices people are willing to pay. The ways that "fannish labors of love… produce value has become paradigmatic of digital capital's blur between work, play, community, and advertising."[198] Independent, unlicensed designers can be tuned into what fans want in a way that a big studio or larger fashion brand cannot.

INSPIRATION & COPYING

In addition to generating data about consumer interests and free advertising, IP owners can look to unlicensed brands for fan fashion designs that are all but guaranteed to

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[196] Sabotini, "The Fannish Potlatch."

[197] Terranova, "Free Labor," *Digital Labor*, 37.

[198] Lothian, "A Different Kind of Love Song," 138.

appeal to other fans. Trends change at an "anxiety-inducing pace," and fans are more likely to be clued into the needs of the community than detached corporate workers.[199] Independent creatives have the freedom to "exercise their brains," be flexible, and take risks, so "capital lags behind them, increasingly dependent on their ideas and initiatives."[200] With the rise of networked culture, the threat to fan culture has shifted from legal action over copyright infringement to the "co-optation and colonization of fan creations, interactions, and spaces."[201] Some fan fashion designers have heard through friends in the licensed industry that companies like Disney look to fan-run brands for inspiration. Williams notes that despite accusations of Disney "parasitically 'borrowing' from Disney fans to commercialize and sell their own ideas back to them, the majority of fans remain uncritical of this."[202] I would argue that fans are not so much "uncritical" of this as they are accepting of it due to their marginal status.

Although some designers were nonchalant about their work inspiring licensed products, others were frustrated or anxious by the thought of having their designs copied by a larger company and believe that IP owners should return the respect unlicensed designers show them. Ultimately, though, they understand that they are borrowing IP and therefore have no legal recourse to fight back. Rice's statements on the possibility of having their designs co-opted by a licensed brand exemplified this common mixture of frustration and acceptance. They are "paranoid all the time" about the likelihood of seeing a knock-off of

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[199] Terranova, "Free Labor," *Digital Labor*, 46.

[200] McRobbie, *Be Creative*, 99.

[201] Busse, "Fan Labor and Feminism," 112.

[202] Williams, *Theme Park Fandom*, 201.

one of their custom commissions on the Her Universe website.[203] Rice designs a lot of *Star Wars*-inspired merchandise, as does Her Universe, and the products released by Stitchcrvft are "completely different from anything I've seen done," so they feel especially vulnerable to copying.[204] Despite Ren's explicit admission of anxiety over copying, they claimed that they "try not to sweat about it too much," since they know it is out of their control.[205] Especially being educated in fashion in an industry-focused program, Ren is all too aware of how common copying is in the fashion industry.

Designers' fears of having design ideas knocked off by licensed brands are not unfounded. Not only is copying standard practice in the fashion industry, but there are precedents within fan fashion as well. Perhaps the most well-known example of a fan-made object being reclaimed by the IP owners is the Jayne hat from *Firefly* (2002-2003, costume design by Shawna Trpcic). It was the type of detail only a fan would grab onto—a random object pulled from the text, one small moment from a short, long-canceled series. Fox only realized the design had the potential for profit after seeing how popular the unlicensed versions were, and the licensed version by Ripple Junction was not released through ThinkGeek until ten years after the series' cancellation.[206] Cherry describes how "*Firefly* fans felt exploited by 20th Century Fox after they had turned the hat… into an iconic signifier of the text and of the fandom" while the IP owners reaped all the benefit.[207]

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[203] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

[204] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

[205] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

[206] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 176.

[207] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 177.

A similar situation occurred with unlicensed brand Whosits & Whatsits' "Neverland Beanie," which propelled the company to popularity in 2011. Ten years later, Hot Topic started offering a Disney-licensed green knit beanie with a red embroidered feather that looks suspiciously similar to the original Whosits design. While I cannot prove conclusively that Hot Topic designers were inspired by the Neverland Beanie, the likelihood is high given the similarities between the products and pervasiveness of copying within the fashion industry. Designer Sarah Hambly has shared on her Instagram about her geek couture designs ripped off by fast fashion giant AliBaba. As discussed in Chapter 1, fashion designs are generally unprotected by copyright laws, as fashion is considered too "utilitarian" to qualify as an artistic work under US copyright law. Thus, independent designers rarely push back against larger brands, especially when they already operate within a legal grey area like unlicensed fan fashion designers. It may seem like a double standard to criticize IP owners for stealing unlicensed designs inspired by "stolen" IP. However, they are merely the legal owners of the IP and had no hand in creating the costume designs on which the fashions are based. The costume designer, whose work is being adapted, does not profit from licensed merchandise anyway. So, as long as a giant corporation profits instead of the original creator, unlicensed fan fashion designers do not see themselves as stealing.

CONSUMPTION & LONGEVITY

In a letter to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's sons Adrian and Denise, Baker Street Journal editor Edgar W. Smith stated that the journal was "a labor of love undertaken at a great financial loss to its (fan) creators, but that it nonetheless likely helped drive sales of Conan Doyle's original works."[208] Unlicensed designers maintain fan consumption and, therefore,

[208] Betsy Rosenblatt, "The Great Game and the Copyright Villain," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 23 (2017): 2.9.

demand for licensed merchandise, which has become increasingly important in a time when studios are increasingly pressed to rely on ancillary revenue sources.[209] Although unlicensed brands tend to have extremely loyal customers, very few fan fashion consumers will buy from only one brand. More likely than not, they support several unlicensed and licensed brands. Fan fashion micro-influencers Alyssa Bradley and Alice Fanchiang, for example, are brand ambassadors for Jordandené as well as Her Universe. Leslie Kay, the creator of the DisneyBound blog, encourages bounders to pair licensed products with geekbounding apparel in her book *DisneyBound: Dress Disney and Make it Fashion*.[210] Fan-made merchandise will never take the place of the original text or branded merchandise and "can only whet the appetite for more."[211] Drawing on Walter Benjamin's "Task of the Translator," Shannon K. Farley states that "it is the rewritings of literature that ensure its afterlife."[212] Fan fashion designers who translate texts into everyday clothing ensure the survival of these texts and their associated imagery through their continuous rewritings.

Because unlicensed brands are run by "real" fans designing for themselves and not for the sake of IP owners, unlicensed brands continue to carry designs for fandoms even when there are no associated releases at that time. Thus, they maintain fandoms and, consequently, demand for products. Unlicensed designers similarly perform their commitment to the fandom by continually engaging with texts rather than moving on after something is no longer trending, because they know their customer base will too. Elhoffer, for instance, says she could "have the same piece on the site for two years and never have to

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[209] Lothian, "A Different Kind of Love Song," 141.

[210] Kay, *DisneyBound*.

[211] Tushnet, "Payment in Credit," 144.

[212] Farley, "Translation, Interpretation, Fan Fiction," 4.1.

discount it."[213] Elhoffer Design regularly releases new merchandise inspired by older films. In 2019, they released two *Hercules* (1997)-inspired dresses as well as an entire collection of *Anastasia* (1997)-inspired apparel in 2020. Whosits & Whatsits has carried a t-shirt inspired by Halloween favorite *Hocus Pocus* (1993) year-round for several years. As Rice explains in regards to Adam Driver fans, "we don't get tired of anything that he does… we're still latching onto SNL sketches from two years ago."[214] By providing people with the tools to engage in everyday cosplay, unlicensed fan fashion brands help normalize fandom. They are doing the work of making media an even more pervasive part of our everyday lives, which ultimately benefits the media makers and increases the overall consumption of fan goods.

FAN COOPERATION

Fans are not unaware of the way their labor benefits IP owners. Every fan fashion designer I spoke with showed a clear understanding of the realities of the industry and their subordinate position as someone creating unsanctioned merchandise. Like the media fans described by Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers*, unlicensed fan fashion is a subculture that "exists in the 'borderlands' between mass culture and everyday life and that constructs its own identity and artifacts from resources borrowed from already circulating texts."[215] While fans feel a sense of ownership over the objects of their fandom, they are also fully aware that they are playing with borrowed materials and have no claim to them. When Red Bubble removed some *Star Wars* designs Ren had uploaded, they accepted it, because they know they are borrowing from strictly regulated IP: "What am I gonna do? I'm a small business with less than 2000 people that follow me, and you're a major corporation. Of course, you

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[213] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, March 12, 2019.

[214] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

[215] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 3.

can tell me to stop, and I'll have no choice."[216] Unlicensed fan fashion designers are not blinded by their fandom, so to speak, but understand the various interests at play and that the stories they love are content created for profit, which will always be the IP owner's priority. The next chapter delves further into how fan labor is exploited by licensors and licensees and why fans are complicit in this seeming self-exploitation.

CONCLUSION

In June 2020, Elhoffer Design released a collection in celebration of LGBTQ+ Pride Month. A member of Starpuff Space posted that she loved the pieces but, as an ally, did not want to take a limited-edition piece away from an LGBTQ+ Starpuff who wanted to show their pride but could not afford to buy at that time. From there, she came up with the idea to collect money for a "Starpuff Pride Fund." Within three days, over $2000 was donated and sixteen LGBTQ+ Starpuffs were gifted pieces from Elhoffer Design's Pride collection for free. One of the lucky Starpuffs commented in the group, expressing the difficulty she has had coming out to her family: "This shows me that no matter what my blood family thinks I am still part of a family whose acceptance, kindness, and generosity, and love just astound me every day." The real gift she received was not a dress but a supportive community of like-minded fans.

This snapshot encapsulates how the unlicensed fan fashion industry remains aligned with a gift culture ethos despite adopting a commercial structure. The combination of commerce and community embodies the inherently contradictory nature of fandom discussed by scholars like Matt Hills and Suzanne Scott as both resistant and complicit. Scott notes that fandom already embodies this contradiction by being a grassroots community catalyzed by commercial media consumption and refers to Barbrook's assertion

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[216] Ren Rice, Zoom interview, November 26, 2021.

that a binary view of gift economy and commodity culture is problematic, since it is possible for commodities and gifts to co-exist. An online economy is fundamentally a "mixed economy."[217] Paul Booth supports these claims with his description of the "digi-gratis economy" that combines gifting and commercialism.[218] By taking a closer look at fan production cultures like unlicensed fan fashion designers, we can better understand how these seemingly contradictory ideologies are merged and naturalized. Especially in an era marked by neoliberal ideals suggesting that personal fulfillment can be found by commodifying the self, most fans see no problem with turning fan production into a business and are happy to support the creative endeavors of their friends in the fan community.

[217] Scott, "Repackaging Fan Culture," 1.4.

[218] Booth, *Playing Fans*, 157.

CHAPTER 4: FOR FANS, BY FANS

In 1912, *Ladies' Home Journal* editor Edward Bok wrote a letter to *The New York Times* in response to an article on the indecencies of Parisian fashion. Bok believed American fashion could develop without the influence of French design and had started a campaign in his magazine to promote American fashion. As Michelle Finamore explains, Bok considered Parisian fashions to be "inspired by commercial rather than artistic interest" and believed fashion should shift toward more "genuine" American designs.[1] In response, *The New York Times* launched a fashion design contest on December 8, 1912, soliciting designs from professional and non-professional American designers. The headline of a February 1913 article announcing the winners referred to them as "Proof of American Originality."[2] The aversion to commercialism and belief that "authentic" and "original" work is best discovered by crowdsourcing continues to this day, and is the foundation on which several platforms and brands are built. In this chapter, I focus on fan fashion design contests, considering how licensors and licensees exploit fans, why fans willingly perform free labor, and who ultimately wins in these contests.

As has been discussed throughout the previous chapters, the rise of digital technologies and social media in the 2000s led to a reconceptualization of media producers and consumers. Fans became more involved in the production process, causing a constant push and pull between fans and creators over control. Although the studios legally own IP, fans feel a sense of ownership due to affective attachment and often use elements of IP in their own work. The internet has exacerbated the tension by making fan-creators more visible and susceptible to legal action. However, it has also made clear how valuable fans'

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[1] Michelle Tolini Finamore, *Hollywood Before Glamour: Fashion in American Silent Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 57.

[2] Finamore, *Hollywood Before Glamour*, 61.

creative labor is and enabled licensors and licensees to harness that creativity for their own benefit. By regulating fan activity rather than shutting it down, IP owners gain the benefits of exposure and free marketing without the potential dangers of IP misrepresentation. Through fan fashion design contests, licensors and licensees get products that are guaranteed to appeal to other fans for little to no cost. Meanwhile, fans get the opportunity to play with their favorite IP without fear of legal repercussions, exemplifying what Derek Johnson describes as the "tension between empowering cooperation and disempowering compliance."[3]

Participating in online communities and creative activities are common ways of performing fandom and engaging with media. Thus, the labor performed by participants in these contests fall under Tiziana Terranova's concept of "free labor" in that the consumption of culture is turned into productive activities that are "pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited."[4] Most participants are aware of how contests seem exploitative, but they do not feel abused and enter into them willingly and excitedly. In this way, WLF mimicked the Silicon Alley workplace culture described by Andrew Ross, which enticed employees with the promise of freedom within their corporate structure and took advantage of their passion for creative work. Similar to other tech companies like Google and Facebook, Razorfish promised an escape from "toil and drudgery in the workplace" and the opportunity to self-actualize.[5] One of Ross's informants from Razorfish described it as "the kind of work you just couldn't help doing."[6] However, this passion for work and lack of

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[3] Johnson, *Media Franchising,* 198.

[4] Terranova, "Free Labor," *Digital Labor*, 37.

[5] Andrew Ross, *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and its Hidden Costs* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 43.

[6] Josie Baxter quoted in Ross, *No-Collar*, 71

corporate structure often translated into Razorfish employees hyperfocusing on their work and putting in extremely long hours without additional pay.[7] This chapter considers how this strategy was co-opted by crowdsourcing platforms and utilized to obtain voluntary low-cost or free labor from fans eager to share their creative labor. Like Mark Andrejevic, I believe pleasure and exploitation are not mutually exclusive in these situations, and that it is possible to be critical of these structures while still acknowledging the personal and social benefits participants gain. At the same time, recognizing these pleasures does not negate the exploitative circumstances.[8] These contests involve a tentative balance between fan empowerment and corporate control, play and labor.

Using geek apparel and goods brand WeLoveFine as a case study, I explore these types of fan-focused online design contests and consider what happens when emerging ecommerce business models overlap with the media industry's increasing reliance on fan labor to ensure the success of its media franchises. WeLoveFine (WLF) has gone through corporate restructuring multiple times over the past several years, so I am focused specifically on how the brand operated prior to 2016. Through a type of fan-sourcing, WLF cut out the middle men and commissioned designs directly from consumers while gaining market research and promotional services for little to no cost. This type of business model ultimately devalues professional labor by encouraging brands to circumvent traditional hiring practices and full-time salaried employees in favor of tapping into online communities for free labor.

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[7] Ross, *No-Collar*, 75.

[8] Andrejevic, "Estranged Free Labor," 153.

As Derek Johnson has pointed out, media franchises have long sought to include those with a "passion for the existing universe" in the production of their licensed products.[9] However, the way this practice manifested itself in the digital age has proven problematic. As argued in the previous chapter, fans are exploited by IP owners just as costume designers are, but they are more accepting of it because of their marginalized position in relation to giant media corporations. Abigail De Kosnik explains that "when a group is categorized as deviant or subnormal, it typically strives for no more than the right to exist and to operate without interference."[10] Ultimately, though, people could be better compensated for their labor and recognized for their contributions by the IP owners, who profit the most financially. I consider how the gamification of labor exacerbates the "contradictions and slippages between consumer work and play"[11] and how these blurred boundaries obfuscate exploitative business practices. These new ecommerce crowdsourcing models require us to reconsider how exploitation works in the digital age, especially when it is appears as self-exploitation.

The contradictory nature of contest labor is revealed through a rhetorical analysis of website copy, legal documents, blog posts, marketing, and other materials representative of WeLoveFine's brand and business model. For background information on WLF and insight into how the company worked, I conducted an interview with former in-house fan fashion designer, Catherine Elhoffer, who was WLF's final full-time designer before they started relying entirely on freelancers and customers for designs. (WLF was Elhoffer's last job in the

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[9] Derek Johnson, "Authorship Up for Grabs: Decentralized Labor, Licensing, and the Management of Collaborative Creativity," in *Wired TV: Laboring Over an Interactive Future*, ed. Denise Mann (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 39.

[10] De Kosnik, "Fandom as Free Labor," in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, ed. Trebor Scholz (New York: Routledge, 2013), 108.

[11] Johnson, *Media Franchising,* 197.

licensed fan fashion industry before starting her own unlicensed brand, Elhoffer Design, which was discussed in the previous chapter.) I also communicated with content creator Yume Warlock, who worked as a model and stylist for three of WLF's photo shoots, participated in WLF's Naruto design contest, and voted in many more contests. Articles from the popular and trade presses provided additional background on WLF and its original parent company, Mighty Fine.

To gain contextual information on how the company presented itself to potential employees and consumers, I looked at promotional materials put out by WLF, its ecommerce site, and any other associated web content, like their YouTube channel. Personal blogs and comments sections on each of the sites gave added insight into fans' and customers' perspectives, while how-to books provided a corporate perspective on customer engagement. As these issues are inherently interdisciplinary, scholarship on fan labor, gift culture, gamification, motivation, fashion law, and media franchising proved especially useful in contextualizing the practice of design contests and explain fans' seeming self-exploitation. Finally, this analysis is informed by interviews with several contestants in the Her Universe Fashion Show (HUFS), a geek couture design contest that will be discussed further in the Conclusion chapter. Although the HUFS and WLF contest differ in many ways, both contests were founded on the idea that the fan community has a lot of creativity to offer and the potential to bring originality and authenticity to licensed merchandise. HUFS in particular expects a considerable amount of fan labor that is mostly compensated in symbolic ways. Thus, there are similarities in the way fans rationalize the exploitation of their creative labor in these situations.

I am interested in understanding the ways that the unpaid creative labor of fans is legitimized by brands and especially by the fans themselves. I begin by analyzing how the evolution of WLF's ecommerce site was consistently geared toward creating a sense of

community among its customers and how their positioning as an artist-focused, fan-run company encouraged these customers to perform free labor through the design contests and social media marketing. Next, I consider how WLF made work fun and attractive for contest participants and aspirational designers by gamifying labor in the form of a competition. Although these contests may be profitable for businesses and enjoyable for fans, they carry elements of exploitation and exacerbate the precariousness of the gig economy by devaluing creative labor. Finally, I discuss how the structure of the contests ensured that WLF and licensors (mainly Hollywood media franchises) maintained control of the IP through limited licenses and ultimately "won" more than the chosen designers. From a fan perspective, design contests align with the gift economy of fandom, providing status and social community-building in exchange for sharing creative labor. From a corporate perspective, design contests fit within the rising trends of fan-sourcing and the gamification of fan labor, which tend to disguise elements of exploitation and encourage active and consistent customer engagement.

Before proceeding with my analysis, I want to provide some context by briefly discussing the concept of fan-sourcing, which is a form of crowdsourcing. The rise of the internet and social media logic's increasing influence on ecommerce forced the business world to adapt, and a proliferation of crowdsourcing platforms throughout the 2000s and early 2010s changed the way many brands did business. Terranova describes the emerging "digital economy" of this time as a "an important area of experimentation with value and free cultural/affective labor."[12] While the opening example of the *New York Times* fashion design contest shows that blurred boundaries between work and leisure and the use of

[12] Terranova, "Free Labor," *Digital Labor*, 38.

crowdsourcing for low-cost/unpaid labor have been exploited for some time, digital technology has exacerbated these issues by streamlining the process.[13]

Rather than looking to graphic design firms for logos, marketing images, and other creative work, brands can easily host online design contests, tapping into a "standing reserve" of workers on the internet where the liminal space between work and play turn people into an exploitable resource by business owners.[14] Especially when crowdsourcing from music or media fans, IP owners and licensees capitalize on people's desires to express their fandom creatively without fear of legal repercussions, securing "authentic" designs that are nearly guaranteed to appeal to other fans. Sean O'Connell, founder and CEO of band merch crowdsourcing platform Creative Allies, described design contests as "a business model where everybody wins."[15] However, the structure of fan-focused design contests ensures that licensees and licensors (mainly Hollywood media franchises) maintain control of their IP and the profits, so this chapter questions whether or not the fan-designers' "winnings" are comparable and in what way.

The WLF design contests are a type of fan-sourcing, a practice that fan-sourcing platform Needle claims to have helped professionalize by "bringing the power of human connection to eCommerce."[16] Like social media marketing, fan-sourcing is based on the idea that the best salespeople are fans of the product who can more easily connect with other fans. Needle and similar platforms teach companies to create fans and then use those fans'

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[13] Ross, "In Search of the Lost Paycheck," 23.

[14] Trebor Scholz, "Introduction: Why Does Digital Labor Matter Now?," *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1.

[15] Natalie Robehmed, "Forget the Merch Stall: Buy Fan-Made Band Tees Online," *Forbes.com*, August 16, 2013, https://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2013/08/16/forget-the-merch-stall-buy-fan-made-band-tees-online/#3d597e343dff.

[16] Information about Needle is available on the company website: https://www.needle.com/.

passion to drive sales. Robert V. Kozinets refers to this as "fan creep" and describes how brands use specific "engagement strategies and tactics" to forge within consumers "a deep emotional response that is indistinguishable in effect from fandom in its characteristics of loyalty, commitment, dedication, devotion, and productivity."[17] Potential customers are connected directly with fans who share their excitement over the product, thereby offering an authentic and effective sales model at a low cost. This is especially easy to do when a brand is dealing with an existing fan community. WLF did not need to create fans. Instead, they branded themselves as an extension of the existing fan community and sourced designs and promotional labor from them. De Kosnik argues that fan activity "should be valued as a new form of publicity and advertising, authored by volunteers, that corporations badly need in an era of market fragmentation."[18] As evidenced by the existence of the customer-engagement platforms like Needle, the post-Web 2.0 corporate world acknowledges this value and is learning to harness it through fan-sourcing for little to no cost.

BRANDING & COMMUNITY-BUILDING

WeLoveFine focused exclusively on the design, production, and distribution of officially licensed products related to media fandom. Their products varied from *My Little Pony* statuettes to *Homestuck* t-shirts to fit-and-flare dresses resembling Iron Man's armor, but all were meant to appeal to specific fan communities. While the brand offered a variety of products, the majority of WLF's revenue came from their t-shirts. In order to keep overhead low, they stocked blank shirts and made their tees to order using direct-to-garment (DTG) printing machines.[19] This enabled them to keep production small and local,

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[17] Kozinets, "Fan Creep," 167.

[18] De Kosnik, "Fandom as Free Labor," 99.

[19] Catherine Elhoffer, interview with author, February 28, 2016.

and protected the brand against the overproduction of failed goods. All of their tees were approved by licensors and designed by an in-house designer, freelancer, or a fan through one of their many design contests. I argue in the Introduction chapter that fan fashion offers something different than standard graphic fandom tees, so it may seem out of place to discuss a t-shirt company. Nevertheless, their use of fan art made their shirts unique, whereas "every other licensed tee was a logo or repetitive brand art assets slapped on the tee in men's cuts."[20] Aligning with the shifts in marketing strategies that took place throughout the 2000s and 2010s, WLF aimed to build a loyal community of "brand advocates" whose "emotional investment" in the brand would encourage them to support it financially and creatively.[21] In effect, WLF aimed to turn media fans into fans of WeLoveFine.

WeLoveFine began as a division of Mighty Fine Inc., a Los Angeles-based fashion company with a variety of subsidiary brands and products sold in specialty stores, boutiques, department stores, and online. Some of its more well-known sub-brands include Disney Couture, Doe, and Public Library. Mighty Fine founder Guy Brand was living in Hawaii when he and co-founder Stacy Kitchin recognized a hole in the women's streetwear market and began printing women's t-shirts for his store, Funk Pistol.[22] In 1992, together with Patty Timsawat, they launched Mighty Fine.[23] Together, Brand and Kitchin gained success printing women's t-shirts and moved to Los Angeles in 1995, infiltrating the SoCal club culture to promote their apparel. Soon, they were providing film sets with props and

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[20] Yume Warlock, email communication, April 2, 2023.

[21] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 73.

[22] Shawn "Speedy" Lopes, "Fine & Dandy," *StarBulletin.com*, August 27, 2001.

[23] Justin Watson quoted in Alyson Grala, "Spotlight: Mighty Fine," *License Global*, June 1, 2006, http://www.licensingexpo.com/license-global/spotlight-mighty-fine.

wardrobe.[24] (At the time, they were still focusing on unique street wear, so there were no licensing issues to work out in order to feature their designs onscreen.) Like the Silicon Valley tech workers discussed by Alice Marwick, Brand and Kitchen tied their personal identity to their brand by wearing their clothing, employing "the strategic creation of an identity to be promoted and sold to others" and thereby presenting "the self as a salable commodity."[25] By 2001, Mighty Fine had licensing deals with King Features, Sanrio, and artist Frank Fazetta.[26] They also created original characters, like Scary Miss Mary, French Kitty, and Ruby Gloom, which they licensed out to other brands, granting these brands permission to use Mighty Fine's characters on their products for a licensing fee.[27]

However, these corporate ties and horizontally integrated organizational structure are obscured in marketing director Justin Watson's 2006 description of Mighty Fine as "a design studio focused on creating innovative and quality knit tops."[28] The term "design studio," as opposed to brand or company, invokes original artistry rather than commerciality, despite the fact that most of their products were based on licensed characters. Furthermore, "creating" is a more artistic action than producing or manufacturing, while "innovative" implies a break from the type of traditional designs one would find at a corporate chain store. Finally, Watson's description of the products as "quality knit tops" evokes high-end specialty apparel, not graphic t-shirts that can be easily mass-produced. Thus, from its early stages, WeLoveFine's parent company Mighty Fine

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[24] Lopes, "Fine & Dandy."

[25] Marwick, *Status Update*, 166.

[26] Lopes, "Fine & Dandy."

[27] Watson quoted in Grala, "Spotlight: Mighty Fine."

[28] Grala, "Spotlight: Mighty Fine."

worked hard to present itself as a fan-run artistic collective rather than just another t-shirt company.

Watson also said the company was interested in developing "long-term relationships with our retailers, licensors, and other vendors,"[29] describing relationships with their licensors and licensees that seemed to resemble the "collaborative, two-way licensor-licensee relationship" that emerged with companies like Hasbro and Dreamworks throughout the 1990s.[30] These partnerships imagined a space where individuals from each of the sectors were free to share ideas across these sectors, enabling toy designers, for example, to pitch plot ideas for a film occurring in the same story world. Watson presented Mighty Fine's licensing partnerships in a similarly collaborative light, explaining that the company maintains steady contact with its licensees to ensure brand consistency and encourages licensees "to talk to each other and share ideas, successes, and failures."[31] Mighty Fine employed the same approach with licensors and developed close relationships with the brands it partners with.[32] Mighty Fine even ventured into the realm of philanthropic partnerships, designing and selling t-shirts through The Samburu Project to raise awareness and funds for the water crisis in Samburu, Kenya.[33]

After several years of selling through retailers, Mighty Fine launched its direct-to-consumer ecommerce site WeLoveFine.com in March 2010. In addition to having access to Mighty Fine's existing products for fandoms like Marvel and Hello Kitty, users had the

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[29] Grala, "Spotlight: Mighty Fine."

[30] Johnson, *Media Franchising,* 93.

[31] Grala, "Spotlight: Mighty Fine."

[32] Megan Elliot, "Dress Up With Mighty Fine," *The Licensing Book*, July/August 2007.

[33] "Torrid and Mighty Fine Partner to Help Bring Clean Water to Kenya!," *PRNewswire.com*, April 9, 2009.

option to customize t-shirts and were encouraged to "subscribe" to the site for 15% off their purchases.[34] While this was a nice offer and good way to build customer loyalty, it was also a convenient way for WeLoveFine to build their email list and gain a direct line for marketing to their customers. For the first year, the site operated as the Mighty Fine blog and sold t-shirts alongside news about different fandoms, the company, and unrelated topics.

Soon, they recognized the value of speaking directly to fan interests and giving them an opportunity to engage. On June 21, 2011, they relaunched as the more "user-friendly" WeLoveFine with "fun incentive programs," like a monthly contest in which customers submitted photos of themselves in WLF shirts to win discounts and possibly be featured on the site.[35] Indeed, the site capitalized on Rebecca Tushnet's idea that "user-provided content makes the sites more attractive to other paying customers."[36] By offering fan contests and other incentive programs, the company emphasized community over commercialism, despite the fact that the ultimate goal was to inspire fans to buy its licensed products. WLF's business model involved a careful balancing act between corporate interests and maintaining a reputation as a fan-focused, artistic community. This supports Paul Booth's argument that the "*art* of the fan has been commoditized, and the *experience* of fandom, of tying one's emotions to media texts, can be actively fostered."[37] In this way, licensors and licensees catalyze and capitalize on the mainstreaming of fandom.

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[34] "Mighty Fine Launches E-Commerce Site," *Earnshaw's*, March 29, 2010, https://www.earnshaws.com/2010/03/blog/mighty-fine-launches-e-commerce-site/.

[35] Youngkim2483@gmail.com, "Welcome to the new WeLoveFine.com!" *WeLoveFine Blog*, June 21, 2011, http://web.archive.org/web/20110917153659/http://www.welovefine.com/wp/?paged=2.

[36] Tushnet, "Payment in Credit," 172.

[37] Booth, *Playing Fans*, 2.

This targeted fan approach helped the community see the brand as "real people" who engage in an "authentic" way with their customers, as opposed to a nameless, uncaring corporation. The use of authenticity as a marketing tool has risen alongside social media's growing influence on ecommerce and advertising. Stuart Cunningham and David Craig argue that one of the irreducible characteristics of social media entertainment is its establishment as an authentic, bottom-up mode of engagement within the community in contrast to the inauthentic, top-down approach of traditional media.[38] The interactive nature of social media enables a more intimate connection than the one-way exhibition of television and films and, therefore, aids in the building of community. In Crystal Abidin's work on social media influencers, she discusses how influencers interact with their followers to give an impression of intimacy, resulting in "perceived interconnectedness."[39] WeLoveFine created the same feeling through their rhetoric and user-experience (UX) design, which gave the impression that they were just a group of fans sharing their work with other fans, thus making their marketing more effective. Yume Warlock recollects that the brand "had lot of good marketing online and offline" and were always present at popups, art shows, and cons. Their uniqueness made them "hard to miss."[40]

Michael Serazio discusses the differences between the "hot sell" of traditional advertising, which involves direct transmission of a "commercial message," and the "cool sell" of guerilla marketing, which gives the consumer a sense of agency.[41] The "hotter" the

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[38] Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, *Social Media Entertainment* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 154.

[39] Crystal Abidin, "Communicative Intimacies: Influencers and Perceived Interconnectedness," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 8 (2015), https://adanewmedia.org/2015/11/issue8-abidin/.

[40] Yume Warlock, email communication, April 2, 2023.

[41] Michael Serazio, *Your Ad Here* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 14-15.

sell, the less likely contemporary consumers are to pay attention. It is now widely accepted that people are more likely to listen to a friend's recommendation over an ad's suggestion. By engaging with fans as if they were part of a social media network in conversation with a community of like-minded fans, WLF capitalized on the ability of the "cool sell" to "achieve persuasion that unfolds in a naturalized, even invisible way."[42] The June 2011 site re-design replaced the "Subscribe" button with "Community," which evoked a friendly, two-way relationship rather than the one-way delivery of services that a subscription provides. Calls for advertising assistance via free social media marketing were presented as community-building activities and a way to achieve status within that community. A June 4, 2012 blog post asked customers to help "build out Pinterest community" and share their favorite WLF t-shirts with friends on Pinterest for a chance to win five t-shirts.[43] Karen Hellekson claims that the stimulus driving fan production is not commercial gain but "a search for community, a way to unabashedly love something, a desire to engage critically but also viscerally, and a mode of personal expression unlike any other."[44] WLF based their business model around these desires for community and self-expression.

The WLF website took advantage of what Hellekson refers to as the internet's "two biggest gifts to fandom"—the "flattening of geography" and its helpfulness in building community.[45] It encouraged fans from around the world to join the WLF community by creating profiles that enabled them to interact with the products and other fans. Perhaps most importantly, an account allowed fans to submit designs to contests and vote on others'

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[42] Serazio, *Your Ad Here*, 16.

[43] Nicole Campos, "Announcing: Pin and Win Contest! Share our tees on Pinterest!" *WeLoveFineBlog*, June 4, 2012, http://web.archive.org/web/20120605022143/http://www.welovefine.com:80/.

[44] Hellekson, "Making Use Of," 125.

[45] Hellekson, "Making Use Of," 125.

submissions. From the start, the design contests proved to be an effective marketing tool for WLF as well as the media franchise sponsoring the contest.

FOR FANS, BY FANS, FOR REAL?

WLF launched their first design contest on June 24, 2011 to celebrate the release of their new *My Little Pony* collection. The grand prize winner was promised a $200 gift card, with four runners-up receiving $25 coupons. All five winners had "a chance of Mighty Fine purchasing your style outright for sale in [their] shop."[46] On July 5, 2011, after finding that the contest generated much more interest than anticipated, WLF redesigned their submissions portal and increased the grand prize to $1000 cash and $50 gift cards for the runners-up.[47] When they announced the winners, WLF was rather transparent that the 200,000 votes from the WeLoveFine community "were invaluable and really helped drive the launch of [their] MLP tees far beyond [their] expectations."[48] Thus, WLF acknowledged the ability to harness the network effects of a social community through their contests—adding value to their products and the media franchises they are based on by getting fans to discuss and engage with them. At the same time, they were careful to cover themselves legally, offering the "chance" that Mighty Fine would buy the winning design.

The success of the first contest spurred WLF to continue integrating contests into their business model and highlighting their focus on fan-generated designs. Using fan art on their tees made them "much more unique than competitors at the time" who stuck to the

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[46] Youngkim2483@gmail.com, "Submit You're my Little Pony Designs and WIN!" *WeLoveFine Blog*, June 24, 2011, http://web.archive.org/web/20110917153659/http://www.welovefine.com/wp/?paged=2.

[47] Youngkim2483@gmail.com, "My Little Pony Contest: Extended! Important New Info – Please Read!" *WeLoveFine Blog*, July 5, 2011, https://web.archive.org/web/20110819001520/http://www.welovefine.com/wp/.

[48] Nicole Campos, "Announcing: Our My Little Pony CONTEST WINNERS!!!" *WeLoveFine Blog*, August 30, 2011, http://web.archive.org/web/20110902033311/http://www.welovefine.com:80/.

same basic designs.[49] Each new contest received prime placement in the scrolling banner at the top of the homepage. By April 2012, the brand seemed to go all-in with the contests, and another webpage redesign led to further promotion of their contests and easier access to the pages. The design contest prizes also started incentivizing customers to share content linked back to the WLF site, encouraging the type of interactivity that asks "consumers to substitute the vested interests of powerful institutions as their own."[50] For example, the grand prize for an August 2012 *Star Trek* design contest started at $1000 but could go up to $2500 depending on the number of ratings the design received: "Be sure to tell ALL your friends, family and internet pals to rate every design! With enough rates, the prize could reach a maximum of $2,500 cash!"[51]

The harder a WLF customer worked to advertise the brand, the better their chance of winning one of the contests. When Warlock entered the Naruto design contest, she does not recall WLF actively telling them to share their work, but she did anyway because she wanted to get votes. Sharing on social media was a natural action for her, since she was "accustomed to online self-promotion at the time."[52] This is not unlike Caldwell's observation regarding rappers promoting luxury brands, and the way that consumers are invited "to 'opt-in' or 'volunteer' to become personal advocates for a brand with their friends… through volunteerism rather than with coercion and hard sell."[53] Similarly, Avi Santo points out how

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[49] Yume Warlock, email communication, April 2, 2023.

[50] Johnson, *Media Franchising,* 206.

[51] "Star Trek Design Contest: Prizes & Deadlines," *WeLoveFine.com*, http://web.archive.org/web/20120806200056/http://www.welovefine.com/contest/24-star-trek-design-contest.

[52] Yume Warlock, email communication, April 14, 2023.

[53] Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 312-313.

fan sharing "can potentially serve to authenticate the brand through the apparent circulation of grassroots support, though in reality, many of these campaigns are carefully choreographed."[54] WLF's encouragement to share design contest submissions on social media not only helped promote their brand and the licensors' IP, but it helped legitimize them as part of the fan community as well.

In January 2013, WeLoveFine introduced their slogan "For Fans By Fans," making explicit their dedication to serving a fan community as well as their reliance on fan labor for designs and advertising. In 2013, WLF web promotions and public relations manager Nicole Campos admitted that social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter were "absolutely key" to connecting with consumers.[55] WLF's use of social media was based on capturing the largest portion of the fan community possible. For example, when *Adventure Time* (2010-2018) fandom became more popular on Tumblr, WLF's presence on the social site grew, since the brand offered a lot of *Adventure Time* merchandise.[56] Their status as an authentic fan-focused brand was further reinforced on the product pages, which offered suggestions of what "Other Fans Also Like" and made it easy to share products on Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter. In addition to promoting WLF's products by engaging with their social media and sharing their products, consumers also indirectly promoted the media franchises on which the products were based. However, through its fan-focused rhetoric and imagery, WLF presented itself as an "authentic" brand in opposition to the "inauthentic," corporatized Hollywood studios, thereby obfuscating its role as the middle man between fans and IP owners.

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[54] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*, 219.

[55] Lisa Granshaw, "WeLoveFine's Fine Line of Geeky Fashion," *The Daily Dot*, August 12, 2013, https://www.dailydot.com/irl/welovefine-apparel-artists-business/.

[56] Granshaw, "WeLoveFine's Fine Line of Geeky Fashion."

The WLF site further worked to present themselves as an extension of the fan community and personalize consumers' connections to the brand by encouraging them to "Shop by Fandom." Furthermore, several of the women's products were modeled by fangirls of varying ethnicities and body types meant to reflect WLF's average consumer. An image on the product page for the Sith Cowl Dress featured a front and back view of the dress on a model with text that read "YUME is wearing a size MEDIUM" followed by Yume's measurements. Warlock recalls being told beforehand that this information would be included on the website and thought it was a good idea to "showcase models of different sizes, heights, and body types," especially since the mid-2010s are still considered the "early days of the body diversity/representation conversation."[57] This information gave WLF customers a sense of how the products might fit them and helped personalize the models as fellow fangirls sharing their love of geek culture rather than nameless models paid to promote a product.

Many product pages also included information about the product designer or "artist," like their name, picture, and a brief description of their goals and interests. This information humanized designers and presented them as fellow fans rather than paid professionals, adding credence to WLF's assertion that they were a fan-run community. Furthermore, the use of the word "artist" implied that these were fans driven by authentic passion for the work rather than paid employees. In addition to their inclusion in the product descriptions, WLF designers had "artist" profile pages where fans could view their products, comment, and receive additional information about the designer, often in the form of links to social media accounts. These designers used social media to build their personal brand across multiple platforms, channeling their success designing for WLF into

[57] Yume Warlock, email communication, April 14, 2023.

sales for their other products, which often included unlicensed fan art and custom-made cosplays. So, although WLF's products were all approved by licensors, they indirectly promoted unlicensed products via their artists' profile pages. This serves as yet another example of the tension between licensed products sold for corporate profit and fan works motivated by passion and affect, which was discussed in the previous chapter. These "artists" were typically part of WeLoveFine's Mighty Fine Artists program, previously known as the League of Mighty Fine Artists, which was essentially a group of on-call freelancers that WLF continually tapped into for designs. By 2013, there were over thirty members in the program.[58] Many of them were found through the design contests, which made winning the contest even more exciting for designers and saved WLF from searching for new employees.

WeLoveFine's announcement video for their second Deadpool Design Contest also features a fangirl—marked as such by her Deadpool t-shirt, Deadpool pin, and the pink highlights in her hair—who pretends to be surprised by the camera's presence and says she has some important news. A jarring cut, evoking amateur or fan-made films, strings together a sentence telling viewers that they need to submit to the Deadpool Design Contest by Friday at midnight. The fangirl says that they can get their designs "on an awesome t-shirt like this!" if they "get off the couch and submit a design," directing them to a link below. The video quickly cuts to a title card, before cutting back to the fangirl laughing at herself. Presumably an employee of WLF since she is also seen modeling several of their products and has worked their booth at San Diego Comic-Con, the fangirl is casual, snarky, and straightforward in her communication with the viewer. In this sense, she reflects the values of both WLF's authentic fan community and the character Deadpool's sarcastic and

[58] Granshaw, "WeLoveFine's Fine Line of Geeky Fashion."

self-reflexive humor. The video feels like a personal invitation and reinforces WLF's claim that their company is run for fans, by fans through its mimicry of fan production methods and personal vlog delivery style.

If the monetization of t-shirt designs is seen as occurring within the fan community by a fan-driven company like WLF, then it is likely to be understood and accepted by fans. But, despite appearances, WLF is part of a larger corporation that is not run by fans and focuses more on relationships with licensors and licensees than with its customers. For example, during their June 2014 *My Little Pony* design contest, some of the regular contributors to the contests noticed that the vote scale was fluctuating for all except two designs by a designer named Dalynn. At the time, contest winners were still being awarded cash prizes and the opportunity to join the Mighty Fine Artists program. So, the winner of the contest had more to gain than WLF merchandise. The fluctuations sent the previously highest-rated designs to the tenth page of results in a matter of hours. When contacted about the issue, WLF attempted to manually remove suspicious votes rather than disqualifying the designs boosted by cheating. Their response was ineffective, despite promising the artists who filed the complaint that "Cheaters NEVER prosper."[59]

This situation and similarly ineffective responses to other contest controversies serve as reminders that there is often a corporate, profit-driven motor driving these seemingly authentic community-based licensed brands. Furthermore, they justify the concerns of many scholars regarding the tendency for neoliberalism to promote individualism, causing disempowerment and isolation.[60] Nevertheless, by presenting itself as a fan-run, fan-focused brand, WLF made fans feel that their labor actively contributed to the betterment of

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[59] sherlockhomosisdominating, "Horses and Cheating in WeLoveFine," *Tumblr*, June 2014.

[60] Crawford and Hancock, *Cosplay and the Art of Play,* 243.

the fan community, not just WLF's community (aka customer base). The conceptualization of fandom as collaborative and communal helps to ease fans' reluctance to give up the legal rights to their creations since they maintain "an affective stake in the cultural ownership of the work."[61]

MOTIVATION & GAMIFICATION

A 2013 Cognizant report revealed that many people are unhappy with their jobs and are "unlikely to add value to the business" if they feel disconnected from work and the workplace.[62] According to a Gallup poll, disengaged employees "cost the U.S. economy $450 billion to $550 billion annually."[63] Since most businesses are focused on profits, anything that costs them money is a problem worth fixing. Cognizant suggests that the goal is to change employee behavior "using the gamification principles of 'stimulus-action-reward.'"[64] While gamification is generally promoted by business consultants, it falls into an ethical grey area due its potential for manipulation and exploitation.[65] Throughout the Cognizant report, the author maintains the same casual approach to the subject of changing human behavior with no acknowledgement of the potential for exploitation by profit-driven companies. Although there are benefits to affecting a positive change in people's behavior, behavior modification by a profit-driven group is unlikely to be concerned with the well-

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[61] Johnson, *Media Franchising,* 97.

[62] Akhil Tandulwadikar, "Gamifying Business to Drive Employee Engagement and Performance," *Cognizant Reports*, September 2013, 6.

[63] Tandulwadikar, "Gamifying Business," 3.

[64] Tandulwadikar, "Gamifying Business," 4.

[65] Marigo Raftopoulos and Steffen P. Walz, "It's Complicated: The Ethics of Gamified Labor," *CHI 2015 Workshop*, 2.

being of individuals. Indeed, Miriam A. Cherry's suggests the potential for "great psychological damage" caused by gamifying work.[66]

When combined with fansourcing, gamification has the potential to devalue professional labor and exploit fans by encouraging them to fulfill tasks previously assigned to paid employees for a fraction of the cost. Gamification adds an element of fun competition that encourages fans to donate their time and talents, making it easier for licensors and middle-men like WLF to profit from their labor. The "cool sell" tactics work for labor productivity as well—if a task can be "advertised as fun or cool, there is a good chance you can get it done for free."[67] Johnson has similarly noted how gamification encourages consumers to "pleasurably identify with their status as laborers and consent to corporate authority in a hegemonic context of play."[68] There exists the potential for manipulation in the way gamification disguises labor as play, empowering consumers to engage with media franchises in new ways while ensuring that the products of this engagement remain under corporate control.[69] By gamifying labor in the form of design contests, brands make work fun and attractive to potential participants and aspirational designers, thereby encouraging them to engage in seemingly self-exploitative activities. Morschheuser Benedikt and Hamari Juho warn those attempting to gamify crowdsourced labor that they "should remain careful and conscious about the ethical dilemma of replacing

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[66] Miriam A. Cherry, "The Gamification of Work," *Hofstra Law Review* 40, no. 4 (2012): 858.

[67] Ross, "In Search of the Lost Paycheck," 19.

[68] Johnson, *Media Franchising,* 230.

[69] Johnson, *Media Franchising,* 216, 222.

income with bells and whistles" and strive to "support intrinsic aspirations, cooperation and self-development."[70]

WLF seemed to take this approach in their focus on making the design contests fun, positive experiences for fans. Ultimately, a person's motivation for participating in a design contest varies based on the individual. Nevertheless, motivation researchers have developed general theories and categorizations that explain the most common motivators that are activated through gamification. Gamification is most effective when the external rewards tap into intrinsic motivators and promise a rewarding and fulfilling experience for participants. According to the perspective of self-determination within motivation research, there are "three universal psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and social relatedness."[71] Fulfilling these needs can help foster intrinsic motivation, which is key to getting people to engage in gamified labor. Rajat Paharia, founder of gamification software company Bunchball, argues that gamification is an effective way to engage employees and customers by tapping into five intrinsic motivators—autonomy, mastery, purpose, progress, and social interaction.[72] Although other intrinsic motivators exist, I believe those listed by Paharia accurately explain fans' complicity in seemingly exploitative contests.

Games allow users to feel a sense of *autonomy*, since they make decisions during the game limited only by its rules. When workers feel a sense of autonomy, they are more likely to support the brand and its goals.[73] WeLoveFine's design contests gave fans the freedom to

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[70] Morschheuser Benedikt and Hamari Juho, "The gamification of work: Lessons from crowdsourcing," *Journal of Management Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2018): 147.

[71] Michael Sailer, Jan Hense, Heinz Mandl, and Markus Klevers, "Psychological Perspectives on Motivation through Gamification," *Interaction Design and Architecture(s) Journal*, no. 19 (2013): 31.

[72] Rajat Paharia, *Loyalty 3.0: How Big Data and Gamification Are Revolutionizing Customer and Employee Engagement* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013), 24-25.

[73] Sebastian Deterding, "Gamification in Management: Between Choice Architecture and Humanistic Design," *Journal of Management Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2018): 134.

interpret the source material however they would like (as long as it fit within the bounds of the licensing limitations) and provided feelings of autonomy that encouraged fans to repeatedly participate in the design contests as voters or creators. The voluntary nature of this gamified labor and the autonomous nature of participation quiets feelings of exploitation. Her Universe Fashion Show winner Camille Falciola "didn't see it as free labor whatsoever," because it was a contest she entered willingly, and the decision to spend significant time and money on the design was her own.[74]

The *mastery* motive makes participants want to get better at games, and can partially explain fans' motivation for entering multiple designs and several contests—they want to practice their rendering skills and work out ideas through trial and error. Warlock recalls spending around sixteen to twenty hours on her design for the Naruto contest, since she is "quite slow at digital art,"[75] and does not seem to view that as too significant of a time commitment. In fact, "fans very often learn more advanced techniques specifically in order to produce fan art,"[76] and several HUFS contestants learned to sew in order to participate in the contest or sought out formal training in between contests to master their skills. Costumer and HUFS winner Kelly Cercone had "a really great experience," because she took the contest as an opportunity to produce a design that had been in her head for a while and test out several techniques that she had been wanting to try. Most personal projects Cercone takes on are "geared toward just doing things that [she] want[s] to learn."[77] It is likely that a

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[74] Camille Falciola, phone interview, October 4, 2018.

[75] Yume Warlock, email communication, April 14, 2023.

[76] Cherry, *Cult Media, Fandom, and Textiles*, 102.

[77] Kelly Cercone, Zoom interview, February 13, 2022.

significant number of participants in WLF's design contests also saw them as a way to practice their digital art skills and flex their design muscles.

Paharia argues that the *purpose* motivator makes people feel that they are making a difference and their efforts have meaning.[78] This encourages them to ignore the real world and focus on the task at hand. Design contest participants spent time on their designs that could be spent doing things with more real-world rewards like schoolwork, building relationships with family and friends, or producing something for profit, but it is because they believed their contribution had a purpose, like helping the fan community. Warlock entered the Naruto design contest, because she was a big fan of the anime and felt like existing fan fashion options were limited, even at WLF. She wanted to design "something [she] wanted to see on a shirt."[79] Although Johan Füller classifies "Personal Need—Dissatisfaction" as an extrinsic motive,[80] I see Warlock's actions as demonstrating the need to serve a purpose by contributing to the Naruto fan community's need for self-expression. Fans inherently understand what Jonathan Gray argues in *Show Sold Separately*—that "'peripherals' are often anything but peripheral."[81] A unique t-shirt design is not just spin-off merchandise but a significant contribution to the fan community and story world.

Games track your *progress*, which motivates people to continue playing and watching their statistics rise. WLF design contests allowed fans to reward one another's progress through the votes and ratings. The motivation to progress also encouraged fans to share their design contest submission on social media in hopes of receiving more votes,

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[78] Paharia, *Loyalty 3.0*, 32.

[79] Yume Warlock, email communication, April 14, 2023.

[80] Johan Füller, "Refining Virtual Co-Creation from a Consumer Perspective," *California Management Review* 52, no. 2 (2010): 103.

[81] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 175.

which ultimately served to promote WLF. Like the *mastery* motive, the *progress* motivator also encourages people to enter multiple contests in hopes of doing better each time. In the case of the Her Universe Fashion Show, most winners participated at least two or three previous years before winning.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, games offer a different type of *social interaction*.[82] Members of WLF's community were motivated to participate in contests by their desire to interact with one another and share their creations with the wider fan community via social media. As I described in the last chapter, feeling a sense of community is a key driver behind fans sharing their creative projects other fans. Along the same lines, Füller suggests that "consumers may engage in co-creation activities because they want to interact with other like-minded consumers."[83] WLF worked hard to present themselves as a community within the fan community, thereby making their design contests an appealing experience for consumers. The shared values of the fan community make it the ideal environment for virtual co-creation activities like online design contests to thrive. Community is an "important ingredient" in crafting a "compelling, flowing, engaging, supportive, and interactive" virtual co-creation experience.[84] HUFS winner Adria Renee had "so much fun doing the show that winning is just a bonus."[85] For her, the contest is about experience and seeing "all of [her] nerdy, genius designer friends."[86] Warlock expressed a similar sentiment regarding the WLF design contests when she explained that "much more

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[82] Paharia, *Loyalty 3.0*, 69-71.

[83] Füller, "Refining Virtual Co-Creation," 102.

[84] Füller, "Refining Virtual Co-Creation," 119.

[85] Adria Renee, Zoom interview, March 2, 2022.

[86] Adria Renee, Zoom interview, March 2, 2022.

talented artists" than her won the Naruto contest, implying her admiration for her fellow contestants and the contentment found in appreciating the work of other fans.[87]

There is something to be said for the pleasures that come with play, creative labor, and feedback from one's peers. Social exchange theory suggests that people "engage in virtual co-creation activities… because they expect that doing so will be rewarding."[88] Indeed, even Terranova admits that free labor is "not necessarily exploited labor."[89] Research on open source participation supports what Linux founder Linus Torvalds "predicted would be the primary motivator: the pleasure found in doing hobbies."[90] As I have argued in the previous chapters, most creative laborers enjoy their work. Even when the job is stressful or difficult, they find personal fulfillment in it. Many joke that they would do their job for free or refer to it has their "dream job," which shows genuine enjoyment of the labor but unfortunately reinforces the myths used to justify undervaluing and underpaying creative laborers.

In the case of the fan fashion design contests, fans are initially motivated by the opportunity to share their love of the source material and desire for creative expression rather than manipulative means. While fan studies scholarship offers a variety of perspectives on various aspects of fandom, it is universally agreed upon that affect is a defining characteristic of fandom, if not *the* defining characteristic.[91] People love the object

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[87] Yume Warlock, email communication, April 2, 2023.

[88] Füller, "Refining Virtual Co-Creation," 100.

[89] Terranova, "Free Labor," *Digital Labor*, 47.

[90] Daren C. Brabham, "Moving the Crowd at Threadless: Motivations for Participation in Crowdsourcing Application," *Information, Communication & Society* 13, no. 8 (2010): 1127.

[91] See, for example: Kristina Busse, "Fan Labor and Feminism," 114; Kozinets, "Fan Creep," 164; Booth, *Playing Fans*, 19.

of their fandom. They find pleasure in engaging with the material and the community, even if it involves free labor. So, in the case of a site like WLF where designers are creating for fandoms they know and love, they are motivated by the desire to invest in something they care about and be part of a fan community. Tech platforms and ecommerce companies like WLF "commodify fannish enthusiasm"[92] and capitalize on creative fans' affective attachments, making the design contest model particularly effective for fan goods. The ability for fans to engage tangibly with a property strengthens their connection to it. So, licensors benefit doubly from the contests—they get fans even more attached to their IP, and they get to manage how fans perform that attachment.

WeLoveFine also tried to maintain their employees' connections to the brand with the same gamification tactics used on customers. According to former in-house designer Catherine Elhoffer, WLF actively encouraged their employees to join the contests even though they were ineligible to win the prizes. If they won, their prize would be passed down to an alternate winner. The competitive nature of the contest was expected to push designers' creativity, and WLF would get additional designs from one of its in-house designers for less than they would normally pay a professional.[93] While WLF seemed to acknowledge the value added by employees, they simultaneously denied that added value by offering them a negligible bonus if they won the contest, passing down their prizes to an alternate winner, and asserting control over the design. The lack of a true reward made this attempt at gamification ineffective, and WLF's increasing reliance on contest labor left full-time employees feeling undervalued and disconnected. The expectation that full-time employees engage in the same gamified free labor as consumers points to a side effect of

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[92] Booth, *Playing Fans,* 172.

[93] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, February 28, 2016.

these contests: the devaluation of professional labor. Thus, although the gamification of work can be very effective as a business practice, it is worth further examination for its potential to devalue professionals and their work through manipulation and improper compensation.

SYMBOLIC PAYMENT & THE GIG ECONOMY

The contest prizes were not equal to the amount of work put in or the benefit received by WLF and IP owners, but fans still participate because in many ways, the rewards seem to adhere to the gift economy under which fandom operates. The reward of pride and status is more valuable than monetary compensation, since gift cultures operate on giving, receiving, and reciprocation.[94] As discussed in the previous chapter, Rachael Sabotini argues that, in the fan community, "status is established and maintained… through the creation of the feast and the distribution of gifts," with original gifts like fan-art being seen as particularly valuable.[95] Therefore, participating in (and especially winning) a design contest was not only a way to contribute to the fan feast but a high-status way of doing so. Karen Hellekson has referred to "a feedback loop of gift exchange" in which the gift of art is "exchanged for the gift of reaction, which is itself exchanged, with the goal of creating and maintaining social solidarity."[96] For the fans, the feedback loop created by contests worked similarly in that they provided their artwork in return for the gift of reaction (in the form of ratings), which fostered a sense of community.

When corporations enter this feedback loop, they utilize the gift of reaction to create and maintain a profitable business model. However, the reality of corporate benefit is

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[94] Hellekson, "A Fannish Field of Value," 114.

[95] Sabotini, "The Fannish Potlatch."

[96] Hellekson, "A Fannish Field of Value," 115-116.

obscured by the way the companies present themselves and the "cool sell." Furthermore, some fan studies scholars argue that standard modes of profit are seen as illegitimate by fans, and that the only legitimate profit models grow out of the fan community and are not borrowed from mainstream capitalism.[97] Although there are certainly fans who take that stance, I argued in the previous chapter that fans throughout the 2010s became more accepting of the monetization of fan production, as it aligns with the neoliberal expectation that freedom and self-actualization can come from pursuing one's creative passions and creating a brand via social media.

Mark Andrejevic recognized this tendency "to equate new media technologies with the promise of empowerment, individuation, and creative control" in his 2007 book *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era* and rightfully predicted that it was "not going away any time soon."[98] This logic permeates Silicon Valley companies like Uber and Postmates: connect service providers with customers, maintain the illusion of their independence, and take a nice cut of the profits. In an increasingly competitive work situation and precarious gig economy, it is difficult for freelancers to maintain business on their own. They need a way to connect with an audience, and these tech-based business models are increasingly becoming the norm. However, they can be problematic as they are ultimately run by profit-driven corporations. (Uber and Postmates have both been sued for unfair compensation practices.[99]) Terranova explains how "the fruits of collective cultural labor" are not merely seized by those at the top, "but voluntarily *channeled* and

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[97] Hellekson, "Making Use Of," 126.

[98] Mark Andrejevic, *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 17.

[99] Heather Kelly, "Uber's never-ending stream of lawsuits," *CNN Business*, August 11, 2016; Prachi Bhardwaj, "Postmates will now pay some drivers differently depending on what state they're in," *Business Insider*, January 24, 2018.

controversially *structured* within capitalist business practices."[100] These types of platforms are often touted with overly optimistic rhetoric about creating opportunities for freelance professionals and appealing to contemporary consumers. Unfortunately, their profits are minimal compared to the corporations in charge, who benefit from freelance creatives serving as their own micro-structures and managers.

In examining the history of Marvel franchising, Derek Johnson discusses the negative side of expansion, which "risked not just narrative mediocrity, but also economic liability."[101] WLF's design contests, however, seemed to safeguard against both issues. The brand and IP owners offloaded risk and labor onto fans in return for authentically fannish and original designs reflective of the fan community's desires. Additionally, the size of the community ensured ideas remained fresh and innovative, rather than turning mediocre and repetitive. Economic liability for WLF was offset by obtaining these designs, marketing, and consumer data at a negligible cost. McRobbie suggests that the "key factor" in this push for people to become independent creatives is "the presumed reduction in costs to the state or employer for these so-called young creatives who must be responsible for themselves."[102] Instead of paying a professional, in-house designer throughout the long process of trial and error that goes into product design or a market research company for information on fan preferences, WLF got that labor for a negligible cost from willing fans eager to share their passion in the form of t-shirt designs and contest votes.

Especially having the approval of copyright owners in the design contests, fans were more than willing to share their work (and labor) with the WLF community. Unlike other

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[100] Terranova, "Free Labor," *Digital Labor*, 39.

[101] Johnson, *Media Franchising,* 91.

[102] McRobbie, *Be Creative,* 71.

modes of fan production like vidding and fan-fic, fan art created for design contests have full approval of the licensor. However, the terms of these licenses "formaliz[e] the dominance of the intellectual property owner."[103] According to the WLF official contest rules, participants were granted "a limited, non-exclusive, non-transferable, non-sublicenseable, revocable, royalty-free license" to use elements from the source material in their designs. The contest rules also state that sponsors (meaning licensors like Marvel) had the right to "modify, amend or otherwise change the Entry… for any purpose, without limitation, and without additional review, compensation, or approval" from the designer. Thanks to these terms, licensors did not have to give up control of their IP, and they received a product guaranteed to appeal to fans without having to do extensive research into what fans want. After all, "viewer-created paratexts are pre-constituted audience research, providing evidence of how viewers make sense of texts,"[104] specifically what elements grab their attention and make them want to engage further. Furthermore, the Contest FAQs encouraged participants to "promote themselves and their designs to friends, family, and followers" on social media sites like DeviantArt, Facebook, and Tumblr—additional labor that further benefitted WeLoveFine and IP owners with free word-of-mouth advertising. This reinforces Kozinet's assertion that the "consumer-as-fan becomes advertiser, entrepreneur, marketer, and producer."[105]

Like I discussed in Chapter 1, exploitation is not just about performing free labor but losing control over the fruits of one's labor. According to the contest rules, winners were expected to "irrevocably assign and transfer to Sponsor any and all rights, title, and interest

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[103] Johnson, "Authorship Up for Grabs," 35.

[104] Gray, *Show Sold Separately,* 146.

[105] Kozinets, "Fan Creep," 169.

in Entry, including, without limitation, all copyrights and trademark rights, and waives all moral rights in the Entry." This ensured that winners could not claim ownership over their work and, like the majority of contest rules and copyright laws, was designed to protect the licensors and corporations against the relatively powerless fan community. As Johnson has pointed out, Terms of Service reorient "the threat of produsage and networked information economies to permission-based models" reinforcing the hierarchy of licensing with IP holders at the top.[106] Kristina Busse discusses how the value of additional labor is often unacknowledged and "any enhanced products still remain the full possession of the original owner."[107] WLF acknowledged the value added by fans by making the design contests the centerpiece of their brand, while at the same time denying that value by maintaining ownership of the work and the profits it generated.

Despite being forced to cede control of their work upon submitting it to the contest, fans continued to participate, often submitting multiple designs for the same contest. They were comfortable with not having ownership partially because, as Rebecca Tushnet states, "fans tend to see their legal status as similar to their social status: marginal and, at best, tolerated rather than accepted as a legitimate part of the universe of creators."[108] Fans saw these design contests as a safe space for self-expression and artistic play rather than as a way for corporations to exploit their work. The contests are presented as a chance to use your creativity on favorite property and possibly professionalize your fandom, but they are designed in such a way that WLF and especially the IP owners benefit the most. As Warlock articulates, "the glow and appeal of status and legitimization also can pull a fast one over

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[106] Johnson, "Authorship Up for Grabs," 44.

[107] Busse, "Fan Labor and Feminism," 114.

[108] Tushnet, "Payment in Credit," 141.

someone so they don't really read through the rules or the repercussions to know that they're signing away their rights/ownership."[109]

After submitting designs, fans continued their free labor during the first round of the voting process by sifting through the submissions, which may number in the thousands, and rating them. The highest rated would be considered by the judges. Kavaliova et al. points out how using the point mechanism of voting gives "consumers the perception of ownership over selection and production."[110] Fans felt involved in the co-creation process, while their labor served the dual purpose of saving the official contest judges from narrowing down the choices while also providing WLF and licensors with data on fan preferences. In this sense, these online design contests function according to the logic of the "digital enclosure," where "every action and transaction generates information about itself."[111]

Interest in the contest quantified through number of submissions and votes provided WLF with data on what their customers wanted and which fandoms were the most popular.[112] As the Contest FAQs stated: "more ratings help determine what the fans really wants [sic] as the winner," but they also determined what types of products the company should invest in outside of the contests. Fans can see the nuances in each designer's interpretation, as they tend to "focus on what has been added in the new work," not what is taken from the original.[113] The community operates as an affinity group, "endowing ordinary

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[109] Yume Warlock, email communication, April 14, 2023.

[110] Maya Kavaliova, Farzad Virjee, Natalia Maehle, and Ingeborg Astrid Kleppe, "Crowdsourcing innovation and product development: Gamification as a motivational driver," *Cogent Business & Management* 3, no. 1 (2016), 14.

[111] Andrejevic, *iSpy*, 2.

[112] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, February 28, 2016.

[113] Tushnet, "Payment in Credit," 144.

things with special meanings" and increasing their market value.[114] So, even though other designs may have been of higher artistic value, the designs sent to the judges were more valuable because they had fan approval. Elhoffer recalls being tasked with designing a cut-and-sew fashion collection based on *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014, costume designer Alexandra Byrne) after the t-shirt design contest for that IP proved particularly successful.[115]

After the fans performed the labor of determining the top designs, the judges chose finalists and awarded prizes in a process that involved negotiating the interests of the licensor, WLF, and retail partners. All designs were first sent to the licensor for approval, who ensured that they aligned with the brand and did not portray characters in a negative or controversial way. After that, designs were considered by judges from a variety of backgrounds, chosen mostly as representatives of their respective companies. For the Deadpool Design Contest 2, judges included Taco Bell's social media coordinator Chris Crawford, SourceFed actor/writer/host/comedian Steve Zaragoza, owner of Alternate Universe Comic Book Store Chris Cortez, and founder of FirstGlance Films William Ostroff. There were also retailer judges who might sell winning designs in their stores, like Hot Topic, Spencer's, Think Geek, and F.Y.E. Therefore, although the majority of the work was done by fans, the final decisions were made by corporations according to what best fit their brand identity and target demographic.

WLF's contests engaged potential customers and drove traffic to their ecommerce site. They also gained fan-approved designs that they could produce and sell for a significant profit with very little investment. Finally, they received data on which fandoms were popular among their customers based on the number of submissions and votes. The retailer

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[114] De Kosnik, "Fandom as Free Labor," 100.

[115] Catherine Elhoffer, interview, February 28, 2016.

judges received a design that they could produce and profit from without having to organize the contest. Companies like Taco Bell and the Alternate Universe Comic Book Store got publicity by supplying judges for the contest. All companies involved seemed to receive a significant reward for little work. As Ross argues, "the most substantial rewards" go to those who are able to commodify and profit from "the aggregate output of personal expression."[116]

The contest participants, on the other hand, received prizes that seem inconsistent with the amount of labor involved in designing and promoting their submissions as well as the time spent voting on the other submissions. Five winners from the Deadpool Design Contest 2 received a package of assorted Deadpool merchandise, a t-shirt with their design on it, and "a personalized plushy taco shaped bag." Two winners chosen by the retailer judges had their designs sold exclusively by that retailer. Their payment was one of their t-shirts and the plushy taco bag. In all capital letters, the contest rules state that: "THE VALUE OF THE PRIZES WILL [be] TREATED AS WORK FOR HIRE AND THE WINNER WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR PAYMENT AND REPORTING OF ALL APPLICABLE TAXES." Thus, if the winner was a good citizen and claimed the prizes on their taxes, they could potentially pay money for winning a contest. Warlock suggests that brands like WLF "hold all the power" and therefore have a responsibility to "not hide behind a wall of legal text" that obscures the fact that they own the fan's design in perpetuity.[117] She argues that there should be "more legal/ethical guidelines to stop brands from basically paying artists in 'exposure,'" because it undervalues their work.[118] While fans may accept the nature of the gig economy, they know they are worth more. Contrary to the argument made by Creative Allies

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[116] Ross, "In Search of the Lost Paycheck," 19.

[117] Yume Warlock, email communication, April 14, 2023.

[118] Yume Warlock, email communication, April 14, 2023.

CEO O'Connell mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this does not seem to be a business model where everybody wins.

Nevertheless, tactics like crowdsourcing and the gamification of labor have become so normalized since the mid-2000s that participants seem complicit and even aid in their own self-exploitation. Caldwell argues that one circumstance that results in free labor is the shift from financial pay to "cultural and symbolic payroll systems," due largely to the "*oversupply of qualified labor and aspirants.*"[119] Because of this oversupply, exploitative practices like "*barter-and-trade*" and "*dues paying*" have been normalized.[120] But to write design contests off as pure exploitation would be to ignore the agency fans have in choosing to participate. Warlock, for instance, "had very realistic expectations" going into the contest and was okay with signing away the rights to her Naruto design.[121] Her motivation was to create something the Naruto fandom would enjoy, not to make money or improve her status.

Moreover, viewing design contests as solely exploitative assumes that the primary motivation for creative labor is and should be money, rather than more symbolic awards. It is a bit of a catch-22, unfortunately, since we cannot ignore these capitalist priorities while living in a capitalist society and have internalized many of these external motivators. Marwick suggests that "ordinary people are now checking their rising status in so-called attention economies not because they are delusional or narcissistic, but because they have unconsciously absorbed a set of economic ideals belonging to the people who have designed

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[119] Caldwell, "Stress Aesthetics," 92, 99.

[120] Caldwell, "Stress Aesthetics," 102.

[121] Yume Warlock, email communication, April 14, 2023.

the software we use to socialize every day."[122] Thus, it is important to see this as a nuanced issue that varies on an individual basis, rather than something we can make a broad moral judgement about.

Although a WLF design contest winner held no legal rights to their work, they could still say that *their shirt* was sold at Hot Topic. Ross likens these types of non-monetary, symbolic rewards to those offered in the eras before industrialization, when relationships with high status people and organizations "were sources of considerable worth."[123] In the era after digitization, "[h]igh online status opens doors, and the lines between cultural, social, and financial capital are blurred."[124] For someone who hopes to eventually profit from their design work, seeing their design featured at a nationwide retailer would be a significant milestone and aligns with Brooke Erin Duffy's concept of "aspirational labor" in which people aim to "mark themselves as creative producers who will one day be compensated for their talents."[125] They labor for little to no compensation under the assumption that their work will eventually get them a paying job.

Fans hoping to professionalize their labor see design contests as an opportunity to legitimize themselves as creative professionals by earning cultural capital. Warlock admits that many fans are motivated to participate in design contests in hopes of being recognized by the brand, which "often elevates their status and gives them growth in their reach, following, or business."[126] Winning a contest and having their shirt sold by a large geeky

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[122] Marwick, *Status Update,* 96.

[123] Ross, "In Search of the Lost Paycheck," 18.

[124] Marwick, *Status Update,* 10.

[125] Brooke Erin Duffy, "The Romance of Work: Gender and Aspirational Labour in the Digital Culture Industries," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 19 (4): 446.

[126] Yume Warlock, email communication, April 14, 2023.

brand becomes something winners can add to their social media bios. These acts of "[s]elf-attribution and self-crediting both function as potential forms of symbolic or cultural capital,"[127] which unlicensed fan fashion designers have proven be turned into economic capital. Ross aptly describes how this type of "free, or token-wage, labor" has transformed the production of cultural commodities into "an amateur talent show, with jackpot stakes for a few winners and hard-luck swag for everyone else."[128] Having a shirt produced by WLF and sold at Think Geek or Hot Topic is about more than bragging rights, and validating one's identity as a creative professional is worth more than a one-time design fee.

CONCLUSION

As the preceding analysis conveys, licensed fan goods and apparel brand WeLoveFine worked hard to present itself a fan-focused artistic community in opposition to more mainstream producers of licensed merchandise. The brand's ability to represent itself as an "insider" enabled it to fan-source free/low-cost labor in the form of original product designs, word-of-mouth social media advertising, and market research on consumer preferences. Essentially, customers bought into the community by purchasing WLF's fan-designed clothing. By positioning itself as a company operated "For Fans By Fans," WLF protected itself from accusations of trying to monetize fan labor from the outside. Nevertheless, that is exactly what it did, since its parent corporation Mighty Fine and media franchise IP owners maintained control over the products of contest labor through strict licensing agreements. As Gray suggest, we need to be critical of "the self-serving hypocrisy of media firms that hype their licensed toy lines, only to clamp down on multiple other

[127] Caldwell, "Stress Aesthetics," 101.

[128] Ross, "In Search of the Lost Paycheck," 17.

forms of paratextual play."[129] At the same time, we need to consider "the adrenalin and the euphoria and excitement" that creative labor has the potential to provide, as it is "key to the paradox of 'knowing self-exploitation.'"[130] Fans were complicit with this business model, because the work is made fun and the rewards extended beyond the contest prizes to include high status within the fan community, feedback and acknowledgement, and (potentially) professional recognition. In this sense, WLF mimicked the corporate strategies used by tech startups emerging in the 2000s, offering creative freedom and self-actualization in exchange for creative labor. By capitalizing on the affective aspects of fandom, as well as the addictive properties of social media, WLF encouraged fans to offer their work up freely and willingly.

In early 2016, the Mighty Fine website started redirecting to WeLoveFine. A series of organizational changes followed, which appeared to be a sign that the contest model and reliance on low-paid labor was ultimately unsustainable. However, the company did not dissolve. Rather, it finally completed the streamlining of its business model and leaned into its niche as a community-based brand. Returning to Hellekson's argument about the illegitimacy of profit models adopted from outside the fan community, WeLoveFine's structural changes ultimately helped it achieve "insider" status within the fan community and be seen as a legitimate means of capitalizing on its labor. In September 2017, WeLoveFine adopted its slogan as its new name. Now known as For Fans By Fans (FFBF), the company asserted itself once and for all as a fan-focused brand reliant on fan labor for authentic and original goods. Shortly after, in February 2018, Mighty Fine was purchased by licensed apparel corporation Mad Engine, and FFBF became an independent brand that

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[129] Gray, *Show Sold Separately,* 187.

[130] McRobbie, *Be Creative,* 79.

subsisted almost entirely off design contests and Fan Forge, their ongoing design submissions portal.

Despite the potential for exploitation, the contest model persists and continues to offer a space for fans to safely play with licensed material and earn status within the fan community, all while causing immeasurable damage to traditional labor practices. As an occasional practice, it is merely a way to engage customers and revitalize a client base. But when poorly compensated, gamified fan labor becomes an integral part of the business model, it is unsustainable in the long run. In the case of design contests, the larger industrial effects include a devaluation of the work of professional designers and increased precarity in the creative industries. If a company can get designs at little to no cost, what incentive do they have to hire full-time, trained professionals? As the contest model and similar gig-based platforms increasingly become the norm, the tension between individual empowerment and corporate manipulation remains an area worth exploration.

CONCLUSION: FROM NICHE TO HOT TOPIC

Although media franchising and transmedia storytelling existed in various forms throughout Hollywood's history, the convergence era brought renewed importance to these strategies and an increased focus on licensed merchandise, including clothing. The fan fashions described throughout this dissertation are part of a larger history of costume merchandising that intensified in the twenty-first century due to industrial shifts catalyzed by social media and digital technologies. In a sense, the 2010s can be seen as the beginnings of a "second golden age" of fan fashion, when supply and demand for costume adaptations began to peak. In the previous chapters, I mapped out the emerging fan fashion industry by exploring the experiences of designers and fans, their creative labor, and the meaning and value of fan fashion. By analyzing a variety of case studies, I have shown that fan fashion deserves to be studied as a form of production in its own right and analyzed as a paratext or entry point into the transmedia story world, where the design and consumption of fan fashion allows for imaginative play and storytelling akin to fanfic.

Because the fan fashion industry is a complex system made up of parallel licensed and unlicensed industries, there are still many aspects to be explored. Studios and networks sell fan fashion directly to consumers through shops like The Disney Store and The HBO Shop, thereby competing with their own licensees. The existence of high-end licensed fan fashion from brands like Rodarte and Gucci raises questions about the different demographics served by the industry and how fan fashion's immaterial value translates into monetary value. It is also worth exploring how fan fashion appeals to consumers who are not fans of the original IP. Whether or not they become fans after engaging with the fashion is a testament to the efficacy of these collections as promotional materials. The relationship between fan fashion and cosplay is also an important area that needs to be developed

further. Thus, this dissertation is meant to serve as an introduction to this topic and foundation on which myself and other scholars can build.

The Her Universe Fashion Show (HUFS) is an especially rich case study that has a lot to offer to the ongoing discussion surrounding the exploitation of professional and amateur creative labor as well as the meaning and value of fan fashion. As the HUFS is a site where the considerations of all the previous chapters intersect, it provides a natural means of summarizing and concluding the arguments made throughout this dissertation. The HUFS is a "geek couture" design contest that culminates in a fashion show at San Diego Comic-Con, and the winners receive the chance to design a licensed fan fashion collection for Hot Topic. Like the WeLoveFine (WLF) t-shirt design contests described in Chapter 4, the HUFS capitalizes on fans' desires to express themselves creatively and their willingness to share those creations with the fan community. Utilizing similar tactics as WLF, Her Universe founder Ashley Eckstein positions herself as an "ordinary" fangirl and represents the Her Universe brand community as an extension of the existing fan community. This encourages consumers to connect with the brand on a personal level and makes them more disposed to donate significant time and energy to supporting its endeavors. However, just as WLF's branding obscured deeper corporate ties, Eckstein's narrative of persevering through obstacles and setbacks to achieve her dream of founding Her Universe underplays the significance of the pre-existing connections and cultural capital she leveraged to get the brand running.

In *It's Your Universe: You Have the Power to Make it Happen*, a book by "Actress, Entrepreneur, and Ultimate Fangirl Ashley Eckstein, with Stacy Kravetz," Eckstein introduces herself as follows:

> I am just an ordinary girl who was born into an ordinary life… I was not born into royalty or great wealth and opportunity. I had to work hard and earn everything that was ever given to me, but thanks to the lifelong influence and inspiration of Disney,

> I've been able to make my dreams come true. By sharing my story and what I've learned, I hope I can prove to you that the universe is truly yours to take hold of and that you have the power to make anything happen![1]

While this is certainly an appealing origin story that sounds inspiring for young fangirls, "ordinary" does not accurately describe Eckstein's origins. Her father started working at Walt Disney World when she was two-years-old, which meant Eckstein and her family had free access to the parks whenever they wanted[2] and had "the opportunity to be extras in the background of a Disney Channel special."[3] After high school, Eckstein moved to Los Angeles and utilized her connections in the entertainment industry to pursue a career in acting. She got her big break on *That's So Raven* (2003-2007) and eventually landed the job of voicing Ahsoka Tano on the animated series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2008-).

So, when Eckstein decided she wanted to fill the fangirl merchandise gap by starting her own brand, she already had a foot in the door at Lucasfilm. Suzanne Scott similarly notes how Eckstein's "deep ties to Hollywood" gave her a significant advantage in securing the licensing necessary to start her brand.[4] While it may seem like Eckstein purposely ignores her privilege in an attempt to manipulate fans and consumers, she truly believes in the rhetoric she spouts: "If you dream it, you can do it." In a sense, she is the ultimate success story for the neoliberal ideals that promote the pursuit of freedom and self-expression through precarious creative labor, then justify it as a necessary part of achieving one's dreams. When someone finds success through these avenues, it can be difficult for them to see that they are the exception rather than the rule.

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[1] Ashley Eckstein and Stacy Kravetz, *It's Your Universe: You Have the Power to Make it Happen* (Los Angeles: Disney Editions, 2018), 8.

[2] Eckstein and Kravetz, *It's Your Universe*, 18.

[3] Eckstein and Kravetz, *It's Your Universe*, 28.

[4] Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*, 197.

Following the strategies outlined by Alice Marwick, Eckstein utilized social media to create a strong personal brand and form seemingly authentic connections with her audience. Her friendly demeanor and presentation as an "ordinary" fangirl encouraged other fangirls to connect with her based on their shared membership in the fan community. Avi Santo describes how IP owners (and I would add licensees like Her Universe) "have made use of online spaces and social media platforms as resources for cultivating brand communities and conscripting them into providing free promotional labor—and sometimes, actual product extension and revenue-generating labor—in exchange for managed participation opportunities in shaping brand meaning."[5] Many former HUFS contestants become Her Universe brand ambassadors who promote the brand on their social media accounts in exchange for free merchandise. Scott notes how Eckstein and Her Universe follow the "discursive imperative not only to articulate the fantrepreneur's own fan identity but to overtly frame fans as having agency over the content or goods created and curated in these spaces."[6] Like the gamified labor performed for WLF's design contests, being part of the Her Universe community and connecting with other fans tends to be the main motivation for repeated participation in the HUFS.

Many of the designers that participate in HUFS are part of the same fan fashion community as the unlicensed designers described in Chapter 3. Thus, for HUFS participants, the creative labor of fan fashion design is deeply personal and enjoyable, which is how they justify spending hundreds of hours and hundreds of dollars on their HUFS look. They approach fan fashion design as translation and storytelling, producing personal and creative interpretations of characters and concepts from geek culture and carving out a

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[5] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*, 219.

[6] Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*, 170.

space for women in otherwise male-dominated fandoms. Fashion designer and academic Adria Renee won the 2019 HUFS with a *Jurassic Park*-inspired cocktail dress. Titled "Isla Nublar," Renee's *Jurassic Park* (1993) look includes a white silk bias-cut dress that falls to the mid-calf and features colorful and detailed beading around the torso and hips. The beading creates a picture of island-inspired foliage with dinosaurs peeking through the leaves and the message "dinosaurs eat man…woman inherits the earth," a quote from *Jurassic Park* character Dr. Ellie Sattler. Renee also created a purse featuring the iconic *Jurassic Park* dinosaur skeleton logo and the phrase "clever girl." She completed the look with a white burnout satin shawl reading "when dinosaurs ruled the earth," based on the banner at the visitor's center in the original film. Her description of how she conceptualized the design reveals the level of thought that goes into designing high-end fan fashion and the motivation behind the details she included:

> Most people give *Jurassic Park* a pretty rugged or adventurous treatment when they design for it. And I was like, well, it has total feminist undertones and themes. Like, I kinda wanna flip that on its head and do something super feminine and romantic for it. And so, yeah, that was kind of how that came about. But at the time I was really working through and talking about my journey of learning to own my femininity and reclaim that in a way. And so, I think it ended up kind of working together with that.[7]

Renee's design process exemplifies the personalized approach common among independent fan fashion designers. She filters the narrative through her own perspective and interests, reframing it through a feminist lens and retelling it through the medium of fashion. Furthermore, she mentions how the journey of exploring her own femininity aligned with her feminist take on *Jurassic Park*, revealing the deeply personal nature of creative labor and its ability to serve as a mode of self-expression.

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[7] Adria Renee, Zoom interview, March 2, 2022.

However, once HUFS winners are tasked with designing a licensed fan fashion collection for Hot Topic, they must negotiate the personal aspects of creative labor with the guidelines set by licensors and the retailer's brand identity, just as Renee Ehrlich Kalfus did for the *Annie* for Target collection discussed in Chapter 2. 2018 HUFS winner Kristi Siedow-Thompson enjoyed her experience designing a Marvel collection for Hot Topic but quickly learned that Marvel is "really particular about what kind of stuff that they want our there."[8] One of the most popular items from the collection was a jacket designed by Siedow-Thompson, featuring Thanos snapping while wearing the Infinity Stone gauntlet and the words "oh, snap!" on the back. Based on Siedow-Thompson's design concept, Hot Topic designers produced artwork that initially had Thanos making a fist rather than snapping. Because of licensing guidelines, they were restricted to using certain images, but Siedow-Thompson pushed back. After a series of negotiations, Hot Topic got Marvel's approval on artwork of Thanos snapping. Even once designs are approved by licensors, they have to be adjusted to fit Hot Topic's brand identity. Siedow-Thompson recalls how the final Nebula-inspired look released by Hot Topic "looks like it was inspired by my designs, but it does not look like my designs."[9] Although working to appease multiple brand identities and consumers was a new experience for many HUFS winners, most of them understood the realities of the situation and did not take it personally when Hot Topic rejected or edited their designs. Like Kalfus, they recognized that success comes from being able to adapt one's creative identity to the needs of the situation, which differ between personal geek couture projects and licensed fan fashion collections.

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[8] Kristi Siedow-Thompson, Zoom interview, March 4, 2022.

[9] Kristi Siedow-Thompson, Zoom interview, March 4, 2022.

The HUFS winners design licensed fan fashion collections for Hot Topic without the involvement of the IP's original costume designer(s). In their initial meetings with licensors, winners see costume photos and/or sketches, but these are often divorced from the story context. So, the designers' interpretations are often based on aesthetics rather than characterization and narrative. Sometimes the story is still in flux when the designers meet with licensors, so they have very little information to go on. The 2015 HUFS winners designed a collection inspired by *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015, costume designer Michael Kaplan), so while there were some characters they were familiar with from previous Star Wars content, there were also new characters for which they had no context. Winner Leetal Platt recalls the uncertainty being "nerve-wracking, because, for example, you were given Captain Phasma and then Captain Phasma is in the movie for like two minutes."[10] Despite Phasma's limited role in the film's final cut, the Hot Topic collection featured a Phasma-inspired jacket and leggings, since her costume was aesthetically pleasing and lent itself well to the style of fan fashion Hot Topic produces. However, these types of disconnects between the fan fashions and the story world ultimately make the collections less authentic and therefore less valuable. As I argued in Chapter 1, involving the costume designer as a consultant or collaborator can help offset issues like that.

All of these experiences point to the devaluation of creative labor and IP owners' tendencies to exploit professional and amateur designers for the sake of maximizing profits. In the case of the HUFS, costume professionals are exploited two-fold, as many contestants also have ties to the media industry. Platt started her career working in the film industry, and Siedow-Thompson regularly creates custom commissions for drag queens, some of which have been worn on *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-). Two-time contestant Elissa Alcala

[10] Leetal Platt, phone interview, September 27, 2018.

first met 2015 winner Kelly Cercone on the set of *Rosewood* (2015-2017), where Alcala worked as a costumer and Cercone as a tailor. Cercone has worked as a seamstress and tableperson on several major projects, including the mini-series *Obi-Wan Kenobi* (2022, costume designer Suttirat Anne Larlarb), which is serendipitous given her experience designing a Star Wars-inspired collection for Hot Topic several years prior. Alcala is an assistant costume designer, most recently on *The Book of Boba Fett* (2021-) and the upcoming series *Ahsoka* (2023-). Cynthia Kirkland, 2018 HUFS winner, got her current job as a textile technician based on a recommendation from a fellow member of the HUFS community. Scott suggests that the contest is "a rare professionalization opportunity for female fans,"[11] which is true to an extent. While the contest serves as a launchpad for many HUFS contestants' careers, it is not due to their connections to Her Universe or Hot Topic but to the community of fans and creative professionals they gain from the experience.

While the prevalence of licensed merchandise reflects IP owners' attempts to maximize profits, it also speaks to creatives' desires to engage with media on a tangible level. Throughout the dissertation, I balance these seemingly contradictory perspectives by criticizing the exploitative ways that licensors and licensees profit off the creative labor of professional costume designers and fans, while simultaneously acknowledging the personal and social benefits fan fashion affords both creators and consumers. It may be simplistic to conclude that people allow their creative labor to be exploited simply because they enjoy what they do, but that is what people's lived experiences suggest. Of course, this does not mean that costume designers and fans should not push back against these exploitative power structures and advocate for their labor to be properly valued and compensated. Indeed, I have touched on some of the ways creatives are trying to work from inside or

[11] Scott, *Fake Geek Girls*, 198.

outside the system to profit from their work without giving a cut to IP owners. Nevertheless, many of these activities ultimately benefit IP owners by serving as free promotional labor.

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of this research, the possible implications of these findings are varied. This project contributes to the extremely limited scholarship on costume design and costume designers, while answering Deborah Nadoolman Landis's call for scholars to recognize costume designers' contributions as storytellers who create characters through clothing. I have not only shown how integral they are to building the initial story world but also the value they can bring to licensed merchandise and brand partnerships. Thus, it is imperative that scholars researching costume design or media-inspired fashion acknowledge these contributions and consider production contexts in their analyses. By taking this stance, I position this dissertation within the field of production studies and as a contribution to existing scholarship on the production culture of costume designers by Miranda J. Banks and Helen Warner. My findings support arguments made by scholars like John Caldwell and Angela McRobbie regarding the sped-up pace of creative production and the pervasiveness of symbolic payments. I have shown how the normalization of these practices further devalues creative labor and justifies improper credit and compensation practices.

I expand the application of production studies methodologies from media workers to fan production cultures, which is a useful approach as the boundaries between producers and consumers are increasingly blurred. Analyzing unlicensed fan fashion designers as a production culture reveals how fans view their creative labor beyond its purpose as contributing to the fan community and offers a new way of analyzing fan micro-economies. While the prevailing view throughout the 2000s and into the 2010s was that fans were against monetizing their creative production, I show how the integration of neoliberal ideals into creative culture and the normalization of the gig economy has made fans more open to

commodifying their creations. Furthermore, my analyses reveal that fans are cognizant of their value to the media industry and the ways their labor is exploited but feel that the symbolic rewards are sufficient compensation, especially the personal and social benefits inherent in finding a sense of community. Writing off the media industry's use of fan labor as pure exploitation overlooks fans' agency, which is an important consideration in this discussion.

The pervasiveness of licensed and unlicensed fan fashion capitalizes on and contributes to the mainstreaming of fandom. Consequently, these findings are not only useful in the world of academia but can be of interest to the industry and fans as well. For the industry, they offer a better understanding of fans' perspectives and a road map for how to add value to licensed fan fashion collections while respecting the creative labor of costume designers and fans. For fans, this dissertation provides some insight into the industry that they interact with daily and how their labor benefits those at the top. Hopefully, with continued education and advocacy, costume designers and fans can feel even more empowered to demand the respect and rewards they deserve.

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