

ALTERNATE UNIVERSES, ALTERNATE AUTHORITIES:
CANON, FANON, LEGITIMACY AND CAPITAL IN THE *UNDERTALE* FANDOM ON
TUMBLR

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Introduction

Fandom has often been viewed as a space where the lines between consumer and producer blur to allow for participatory fan empowerment and even an escape from capitalist inequalities (Jenkins, 1988). However, this view is a little bit too utopian; fandoms run on a system of cultural capital in which certain modes of participation are privileged, creating a hierarchy of fans in which some are more legitimate and prestigious than others and receive more benefits for their work (Bourdieu, 1984; Fiske, 2002). In the legal sense, who receives credit and who is authorized to determine “canon” are relatively simple questions; however, fan activity complicates the answers considerably, producing strange new inequalities of power and capital within the fandom. This research uses a mixed discourse analysis and digital ethnography approach to explore how the production of “fanon”, or “fan-canon,” content affects the distribution of cultural capital within the *Undertale* fandom on Tumblr.

Cultural Capital and Fandom’s Shadow Cultural Economy

The theoretical framework of this study is strongly informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of coexisting and interlocking economic, social, symbolic, and cultural capital systems. “Economic capital” is the simplest system, referring to financial property, while symbolic, social, and cultural capital are less directly relatable to monetary value (Bourdieu, 1986). “Symbolic capital” refers to the power one receives from prestige, which can be invested in others through endorsements (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013), while “social capital” is the power one holds through social connections, such as group membership, in-group status, and the ability to influence institutions and networks of connections (Bourdieu, 1986). “Cultural capital” and the

“cultural economy” describe how certain forms of “tasteful” self-presentation and behavior, cultural goods, and institutional qualifications provide more or less power to their holders (Bourdieu, 1984). These forms of capital intersect, and in many cases are convertible from one form into another, although not always easily.

While a considerable amount of fandom studies literature describes fandom as an empowering “gift economy,” positioning fan culture as outside of the existing cultural economy and capitalist commodification, this research takes the position that fandom is in fact embedded within capitalist frameworks, producing hierarchies of unequal capital amongst fans (Guo, 2018; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1988; Turk, 2014). The theoretical perspective of this work is particularly shaped by John Fiske’s consideration of fan communities as subcultures that form what he calls a “shadow cultural economy” of popular cultural capital separate from that of official cultural capital (2002); what is valuable within a fandom context might be derided as “nerdy” in general society, for instance. While distinct, the shadow cultural economy is inextricable from official economies of capital, and there is a notable tension within fandoms between rebellion against inequalities of official capital and hopes to achieve some form of official capital through fan activities. Popular cultural capital can (with some difficulty) result in the production of economic capital, such as when famous fans sell commissions of fanart or fanfiction (Bourdieu, 1984; Fiske, 2002).

“Canon” and “Fanon”

The terms “canon” and “fanon” are widely used among fan communities to bestow legitimacy and value onto certain works. The biblical roots of the term “canon” call upon the idea that some texts are true divine writ and others are invalid (Lim, 2017). A “literary canon” has been used to refer to a list of works that are considered more important, more representative,

or perhaps truer than others of their kind (Gorak, 1991); what is labeled as canon has been invested with cultural power by those historically rich in symbolic capital, including publishers, reviewers, the press, and social institutions such as education. Despite carrying ideals of “a sublime truth” (Gorak, 1991, p. ix), canons are constantly in flux, created, debated, and altered by specific (and often exclusive) groups of human beings through processes of canonization. From a fandom perspective, “pop culture canon” is colloquially understood as “a body of work that establishes its own internal storylines and/or character history, deemed to be official by either the creator or publisher” (Chaney & Liebler, 2007, p. 3); we can thus understand that canonization may be supported by modern capitalist intellectual property law as well as through investments of symbolic capital by publishers, reviewers, and even fan groups (Kahane, 2016). However, this is not the only system by which canonization occurs; Ahuvia Kahane posits that within fan communities, ideas may gain some level of canonical status through popularity or lose canonical acceptance through lack of it, disregarding “official” authority to focus instead on the level of popular cultural capital invested (2016). The term “fanon,” shorthand for “fan-canon,” is often used to refer to these “ideas and concepts that fan communities have collectively decided are part of an accepted storyline or character interpretation” (Chaney & Liebler, 2007, p. 1). More specifically, fanon is composed of popular accepted ideas that are *not* canonized by the traditional author-publisher authority; it exists as a separate category of ideas linked to the “official” canon (Kahane, 2016). Some definitions of the term further limit “fanon” to only those ideas that “do not contradict [canon]” (Kahane, 2016, para 6.6). On one hand, this idea of “fanon” acknowledges the authority of fans in the canonization process, but at the same time, the term denies fans the power to legitimize their own ideas as “real” canon by emphasizing a distinction between “fanon” and “canon.” Resultingly, the creation of fanon content is sometimes

viewed negatively as fans lacking knowledge and mistaking their own ideas for more valuable officially canonized material (Wheeler, 2012). However, fans may also create “fanon” in the sense of “non-canonical extensions to the original storyworld” (Mittell, 2012, p. 41) that are explicitly divorced from the legally copyrighted canon; in this light, fans who create fanon are not making mistakes in search of “official” or “true” canon, but rather seizing control to create new related works whose canonization processes are not controlled by traditional authorities. This paper acknowledges these multiple understandings of fanon in order to grapple with how fans take different stances regarding the ‘canonicity’ of any fanon works but places more emphasis on the latter concept in which fanon creation is recognized as a purposeful choice that offers particular benefits to contributors.

Fanon and the Fandom Cultural Economy

Based on Henry Jenkins’ image of the “textual poacher,” fans appear to hold a certain degree of veneration for the canonical text of the fandom object even as they “appropriate it for their own uses” (1988, p. 37) and create fan works. In this view, fan work would be more legitimate and valuable within the community when closely linked to official canon, rather than fanon. However, despite the cultural capital offered by adherence to the canonical fan object, many fans create and share fanon works with full awareness of their fanon nature, bringing into question what value they might gain from stepping further away from the official text. From a copyright law perspective, focusing on fanon may actually offer fans a better legal argument in defense of their work, being more transformative than derivative (Pearson, 2010; Scalzi, 2007). This argument is particularly key in the risky situations where money is being made from fan work (i.e. economic capital is being derived from popular cultural capital) (McCardle, 2003). I argue that the creation of explicitly fanon content is motivated by an urge to claim

(transformable) cultural capital within the fandom by redistributing the power to canonize works from official copyright owners to fanon creators and contributors.

Just as there are the official and shadow cultural economies which place different weights on economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital, we can see there are two major systems that intersect in the canonization process of cultural works: the system based on copyright as a legal form of attribution of authorship and ownership under capitalism, which is backed particularly strongly by economic capital, and the system within fan communities based more heavily on cultural, social, and symbolic capital, in something of a defiant response to the inequalities presented by the legal system. The power to determine canon within a fandom is influenced by both systems at once, with multiple coexisting and conflicting evaluations of a text's value. The canonized and copyrighted published text holds both legalized value and legitimacy, but also a significant degree of popular cultural capital within the fandom, as fans regard the "official" fandom object and creator with some veneration (Jenkins, 1988). Yet, at the same time, fan communities defy the authority of legal systems of copyright by collectively creating and popularizing a fanon of concepts and ideas that are not supported by the official canon but are still invested with cultural power (Guerrero-Pico, 2016). There's an impulse to resistance in the fan community, but one that also draws from, and possibly desires to be recognized by, the legal system of copyright, canonization, and legitimacy, which is strongly tied to economic capital.

Fandom and Alternate Universes

"Alternate universes," or AUs, are a type of literary work that attempts to answer the question "what if?" In a fandom context, the creation of AUs is a popular form of creative expression, referring to anything from changing the outcome of one canonical decision, to "[lifting] the characters from their usual setting...and [shifting] them to another time and place"

(Wheeler, 2012, p. 1). Mar Guerro-Pico defines two distinctive categories of AUs: “contextualised alternate universes” (CAUs) which cover “divergent narrative possibilities starting at a specific point in the canon but without breaking free from the original diegetic world” (2016, p. 82) and “pure alternate universes” (PAUs) which position “the characters and their basic canonical characterisation in a diegesis that has nothing to do with the original one” (2016, pp. 82-83). Within fandom communities, CAUs rely on a certain degree of adherence to official canon in order to be accepted by fans, while PAUs are more unambiguously fanon and thus less constrained by the decisions of traditional authority over canonization.

Stepping further away from copyright-owner authority, AUs open up possibilities for fans to “pick another fan’s AU version and start from there, definitively leaving the canon behind” (Guerro-Pico, 2016, p. 82), and form a fanon “shared universe” through the hypertextually connected body of fanwork for that AU. This paper utilizes the term “transtexts” to refer to the broad category of fan-authored transformative works (Stein, 2017); while fanfiction and fanart are popular research subjects, transtexts include material such as social media posts, blogs, and fan wikis. A set of related transtexts for a shared AU, although indisputably fanon in regard to the original work, can be understood also as a separate text with its own canon – and thus its own contradictions and tensions in determining what counts as the AU canon and who counts as an authoritative creator. Seeing as AUs are fanon works, an ‘AU canon’ is not defined by the traditional legal authorities of official publishing and copyright ownership but relies heavily on ‘what the most people agree is true for the AU;’ that is, the investment of symbolic and popular cultural capital by the broader fan community. At the same time, the popular opinion can be unevenly influenced by figures who hold significant symbolic, social, and cultural capital within the fandom, particularly those who are perceived as holding authority over the text in ways that

mirror economic authority over an officially published work (such as original creatorship). Complicating this, the very authorship of an AU is ambiguous, as the conglomeration of transtexts that makes up a shared AU is often built through collaborative fandom interactions, not all of which are driven by an ‘original’ or ‘official’ creator.

Case Study: The *Undertale* Fandom

The production and distribution of AU fanon works has been notably prevalent in the fandom of the game *Undertale* (2015) by independent game developer Toby Fox. *Undertale* is a story about a child falling into a kingdom of monsters sealed under a mountain, meeting many unique characters along the way. Unlike traditional RPGs where a hero fights and kills monsters to win, *Undertale* also allows the player to choose nonviolent ways of solving their problems and escaping the Underground, with a wide array of possible endings depending on player choices. The game boasted over 3.5 million players through Steam alone in 2018 (Orland, 2018), and serves as an example of a massive online fandom with an extensive and widely accepted array of fanon works: as of Jun. 14, 2022, the *Undertale AU Wiki* holds articles describing 516 AU concepts, which are explicitly fanon (“Undertale AU Wiki”, n.d.).

One possible factor in the abundance of AU content within the *Undertale* fandom is that the game is independently owned by a single developer, Toby Fox, who has taken a permissive view on fandom activity and has even loosened policies over time to allow individual fans to sell their fan work (Fox, 2016). This independent ownership is notable as, rather than just policing financial copyright infringement as marketplace competition impacting sales of the original work, corporate owners are also concerned with controlling/limiting the ‘undesirable’ activities of fandom lest unruly fans damage the image (and thus commercial value) of their creative properties by association (Skotnicki, 2020). Despite the damage that a ‘bad’ fandom can do,

Toby Fox has been very lenient, asking fans to keep pornographic content separate from mainstream content but otherwise leaving the fandom free to go wild with fanon, porn, and AUs, no matter how it makes their labour less commercially exploitable (Jones, 2019). The excessive popularity of fanon and AU content has, in fact, contributed notably to the negative reputation the *Undertale* fandom currently has as a “trash fandom,” “full of people and fan output that is seen as morally reprehensible or too obsessed” (Jones, 2019, p. 47). Under a corporate owner, this would quite likely not have been possible. Fox’s status as an independent creator has allowed him to make unilateral decisions regarding *Undertale*’s fandom that do not necessarily focus on profit.

An interesting phenomenon within the *Undertale* fandom is that many popular older AU concepts such as “Underfell,” “Underswap,” and “Horrtale,” are understood as being “community shared:” “AUs that are effectively ‘in the public domain’, meaning that they can be used by anybody without permission from anybody else” (“Templates Policy”, n.d.). This is either due to explicit permission being given by creators, or by creators abandoning the AU for long periods of time (“Templates Policy”, n.d.). These situations create many questions because while these fanon creators have let go of strict traditional ideas of copyright and the economic capital involved, it is not entirely clear how the fandom cultural capital involved in these AUs is being distributed. I focus on fan behaviour around community-shared AUs as their status in the fandom public domain itself complicates traditional capitalist norms of ownership, intellectual property, and labour value.

Tumblr as a Fandom Platform

This study focuses on the behaviors of the *Undertale* fandom as expressed through the social media platform Tumblr, an important distinction as each social media website shapes what

kinds of activities, communications, and interactions are possible and allowed on its platform through its specific digital infrastructure designs and policies (Sybert, 2021). Resultingly, the cultures and norms of online communities like fandoms are highly influenced by their host platforms (Jones, 2019). For example while Twitter is known as a site full of celebrities and the possibility of popularity, Tumblr is a social media site well known for “being radical, immature, and lawless, but also the best place for building back and forth conversations and shitposting” (Jones, 2019, p. 8). Since its inception, Tumblr has offered a space for fan communities and fan culture to grow and thrive, with a considerable amount of research into the platform focusing on its nature as “a hub of fandom activities” (Attu & Terras, 2017, p. 536). Additionally, basic platform designs and mechanics such as character or image limits change how fans can (and thus do) communicate from website to website; consider, for example, that Tumblr posts allow for a large amount of multimedia content and text per post, where Twitter limits each post to 280 characters and 4 images. These examples are not meant to imply a complete separation of fandom communities between platforms, as many fans use more than one platform to participate in fandom, but it should be noted that fans generally behave differently depending on what website they are working from, and common behavior differences shape dominant trends in community norms on that platform.

In terms of specific mechanics, many of Tumblr’s features are similar to those of other social media platforms; the ability to press a “like” button to indicate support for a post, for instance, is relatively ubiquitous on social media platforms (Tiidenberg et al., 2021). However, as Tumblr’s specific configuration of features is key to understanding how users communicate on the platform, I will provide an overview of Tumblr’s general functions, with a focus on those which are fairly unique to the platform.

Tumblr's infrastructure allows for both short and long-form text posts, enabling far more elaborate textual pieces than Twitter. Users are able to make posts in 7 formats: text, "images (categorised as "photo"), videos, website links, chat transcripts, quotes, and audio files" (Attu & Terras, 2017, p. 529). Another notable Tumblr feature is the html options given in post creation, which allow users to insert multiple links into posts, as well as the "@ function" by which users can directly alert other users to their posts – to elaborate, by writing @username in the text of a post, the Tumblr blogger with that username will receive a notification about that post.

Alongside actual post content, users can apply text-form hashtags, or tags to their posts; up to 30 are allowed per post, although only the first 20 will appear in user searches (Attu & Terras, 2017). Tags are thus both an additional medium for self-expression and a mechanic to boost discoverability (and perhaps popularity) of one's posts.

One of the main ways Tumblr users interact with content is through their home page, or "dashboard," which displays all of a user's own posts as well as those of the users they are following: "a continually updating stream of content representing each Tumblr user's tastes" (Attu & Terras, 2017, p. 529). Having a large number of followers is thus indicative of both popularity and reach on the platform, although Tumblr, unlike other social media such as Twitter or Instagram, does not display users' follower count publicly; barring direct user declarations, user popularity on Tumblr can only be extrapolated from post popularity. One measure of post popularity is the number of "notes" a post has, composed of three sources added together: replies, reblogs, and likes. Tumblr replies and likes are similar to counterpart functions on other social media, while the "reblog" feature is where Tumblr really differs from both traditional blogging platforms and other social media. Users are able to essentially duplicate posts onto their own Tumblr blogs and thus onto their follower's dashboards, with the ability to add their own

comments and tags and without disconnecting the reblogged post from the original creator (Attu & Terras, 2017). While following blogs is a major factor in how users view new posts, Tumblr also offers a search function to find new blogs and posts by keywords and tags. This search function offers three filters: a choice between “Top” and “Latest,” a time range filter, and a post type filter. While “Latest” is fairly self-explanatory, the “Top” filter is more complicated; it does not sort posts only by overall popularity but by an unknown algorithm most likely involving (but not limited to) originating blog popularity, recency of posting, and popularity through notes (Stoel, 2016). However, it is the automatic filter upon opening the search function, and thus the most common view for users looking for new posts.

While the *Undertale* fandom is not limited to Tumblr, continuing to thrive across multiple intersecting platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, Amino, and TikTok, Tumblr remains a crucial site for its fandom activity (Farley, 2018). After *Undertale*'s release in 2015, it became a smash hit online and particularly on Tumblr, with original and official blogs for many very well known *Undertale* AUs such as Underfell, Underswap, and Horrortale being hosted on Tumblr in 2015-2016. Tumblr is known for enabling longer term archives of content (Booth, 2018), a feature which made it an ideal repository for official AU blogs to share information about their AU concepts as well as interact with the work of other fans, without the quick obsolescence of other social media such as Twitter. The *Undertale* fandom thrived on Tumblr well until the website's 2018 adult content ban, which deflated enthusiasm and activity across the whole platform, especially for a fandom with a considerable amount of NSFW (Not-Safe-For-Work) content creators (Jones, 2019). However, in several cases Tumblr continues to publicly host 'official' AU concepts, comics, art, and worldbuilding, which creates an intriguing

situation in which original and official creators are placed side by side with popular transformative and derivative creators.

Areas of Opportunity and Research Question

Fandom studies research based on the model of the fandom gift economy tends to overlook how some forms of fan work are more valued than others, while research using a cultural economy model tends to be very general and nonspecific about what inequalities exist (Guo, 2018; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1988; Turk, 2014). There is currently a gap in research into specific fan cultures to explore what kinds of fan work are valued and whose work is acknowledged. Fanon in particular is often overlooked as a lesser form of content, rather than explored for its value within fandom communities (Chaney & Liebler, 2007). While the concept of canon and its importance within both legal structures and fandom culture is well understood, where exactly fanon fits into ideas of ownership is largely unclear.

While the game *Undertale* itself has inspired significant recent research into psychology, ethics, and ludonarrative, *Undertale*'s fandom is less studied; *Undertale* has received passing mentions in broad fandom studies (Farley, 2018; McInroy & Craig, 2018), but in-depth exploration of the fandom's culture has so far focused on the LGBTQ+ aspects of the game and fan community (McInroy et al., 2021; Ruberg, 2018). Despite their huge popularity, the multiplicity of AUs in the *Undertale* fandom have only received passing notice by online news sources such as *Buzzfeed* (wiltingdaisy, 2017) and researchers such as Michelle Jones, whose thesis explores *Undertale* fandom culture as an example of antagonism and controversy within fan communities (2019). The implications of the centrality and popularity of AUs and fanon within the fandom are greatly unexplored and this area requires further examination to understand the motivations behind these fanon works.

My research aims to investigate how and why *Undertale* fans on Tumblr give credit or exhibit ownership for their fanon ideas and labour, with the aim to answer questions such as: what is driving the creation of explicitly fanon works, that is, AUs and AU content, by fans? What value do fans gain from being credited, and what benefit do they receive from giving credit? This research, while specific to the *Undertale* fandom and the social media platform Tumblr, will contribute to broader understanding of how fandom cultural economies function in the modern online world.

Research Positionality

My positions as a long-time Tumblr user and participant in the *Undertale* fandom significantly influence my positionality as a researcher in this study. Like many Tumblr users, I have grown up with technology and am relatively digitally savvy and up to date on current online language use, as well as capable of reading and writing in English (the most common language on the platform). My experience-based understandings of how Tumblr works and how Tumblr's features are regularly used by bloggers have greatly informed both my gathering and analysis of data; I have done my best to explain how Tumblr communities interact in the sections above in order to make my analyses more accessible to non-Tumblr-users. My experience entrenched in fandom culture gives me relevant knowledge to allow for interpretations of sometimes limited or obscure data, but at the same time, some of these interpretations involve making assumptions based on my particular past experiences rather than what the specific data itself shows. I have endeavored to remain reflexively aware of my personal biases to view the sampled data without assumptions based on prior knowledge of fandom details. I also want to note that the *Undertale* fandom is known for significant internal antagonism often regarding the morality of certain content, particularly shipping (Jones, 2019); while my personal position is that I do not believe in

policing fictional materials, the focus of this study is not on any moral aspect of the content, and I do not intend to place judgement on any data regardless of position on this topic.

Methodology

This study examines the Tumblr-based portions of the hypertextual bodies of fanwork created for three very popular “community shared” AUs: Underfell, Underswap, and Horrortale. There are three categories of fandom transtexts analysed in this research: fan wiki pages, informational posts about the AUs from ‘official creator’ blogs, and Tumblr posts about each AU. The former two categories provide background information about each AU and its creatorship, while Tumblr posts about each AU serve as the sample dataset for a methodology combining digital ethnography with large-scale content analysis. While technically discrete texts on different platforms, these transtexts function as part of a larger, interconnected cross-platform body of AU content and information that *Undertale* fans collectively consume and produce; although the population of focus for this study is the *Undertale* fandom on Tumblr, Tumblr fans are also fan wiki writers and readers, and their activities on different platforms influence their actions on Tumblr as well. I argue that all these texts interact with each other and collectively build shared AU fanon to shape community discourses and understandings of *Undertale* AUs.

This study uses a “One-Way Mirror” digital ethnographic approach, using Tumblr posts to study participant behaviors “without participants knowing they are being watched or being able to reciprocate” (Urbanik & Roks, 2020, p. 218). Although interviews are a traditional part of ethnographic research, this digital ethnography focuses on observations only. While I recognize the benefits of approaches in which digital ethnographers make their research presence known to participants, this study is a fairly preliminary examination of a particular subculture and I believe

there is already a significant amount to study from how fandom members behave on Tumblr without interference.

I recognize that there are ethical issues brought up by the collection of data without explicit consent, especially as, while generally not involving any criminal activity, the acute antagonism within the *Undertale* fan community means that certain fandom posts (common accusations being those of fictional depictions pedophilia and incest) can invoke persecution from others both within and outside of the fan community (Jones, 2019). However, I believe that the ethical dilemmas that come with collecting this data without consent are somewhat alleviated both by these posts being publicly available online and by the particular properties of Tumblr as a social media platform. Firstly, while private accounts do exist on Tumblr, none of their material appears in Tumblr search results, so all accounts involved in this study have chosen to make their material is public and visible to others. In the modern online world, the possibility of your data being analyzed for unknown purposes has become a known cost for using social media platforms (van der Schyff et al., 2020); users' act of publishing their posts publicly is generally accepted as some form of consent. On the other hand, Tumblr's properties as well as this research's focus on fandom activity mean that the data being collected is relatively non-invasive. As mentioned previously, Tumblr users are known by username, and in many cases keep their Tumblr profiles and posts free from personal information such as legal names. Further, as I sampled posts by searching fandom keywords such as "underfell" or "underswap," the results are primarily posts created in order to interact with fandom, not personal posts – the posts studied are those which are intended to be seen by other people who the creator might not know personally, albeit perhaps not with the expectation of researchers.

As the genealogy of fandom is central to my research, I believe it is necessary to include attribution to the individuals whose works are recognized as the origins of AU movements within the *Undertale* fandom. These founding individuals are well-known figures within the fandom, and in several cases are known by usernames that match their AU creations, making any attempt at anonymity questionable. Instead, I have anonymized the data of individuals who are not ‘founding’ creators; although it is difficult to anonymize this data as online search functions allow users to search for entire lines of text and combined tags, I have taken further steps to protect individuals by anonymizing Tumblr usernames and using only short excerpts and paraphrases from posts. On top of these factors, as a researcher I have attempted to respect the privacy of my subjects by considering broad patterns of shared behavior rather than digging into the personal details of individual accounts and minimizing overcollection of possibly personal information by recording relevant observations from post content rather than saving entire posts.

Data Gathering

As one must be logged into a Tumblr account to view large amounts of search results, I chose to create a new research-only account for the purposes of this study in order to avoid any possible algorithmic bias from my personal accounts. As I did not interact with participants in this study in any perceptible fashion from the subject perspective, this method avoided any of the possible ethical or practical issues regarding rapport and trust towards research identities (Urbanik & Roks, 2020). Unlike Twitter posts, Tumblr posts are often too long vertically to be screenshotted appropriately, and Tumblr search results can vary wildly every time the page is loaded. After testing out webpage-saving tools as well as the mass-Tumblr blog/search downloader Tumb13, I determined that the only way to record the information I was most

concerned with for each post was by manually copying it from the search results webpage into an excel chart.

An equal sample of 150 Tumblr posts regarding each AU was gathered and recorded from the top of the Tumblr search engine results based on the keywords “underfell,” “underswap,” and “horrortale” respectively, making up a total sample of 450 posts. I chose to search for keywords rather than tags in order to capture not only “exact or almost exact results” but “fairly similar results too” (Random, 2018). As these results are highly variable in post order, and both post content and post notes can vary over time due user activity, I recorded the times at which search results were loaded by the website: both “underfell” and “underswap” were loaded on May 16, 2022, at 3pm, while “horrortale” was loaded on May 17, 2022, at 4pm. Due to the limitations of the Tumblr search engine and the unavailability of large-scale data scraping mechanisms for the platform, these samples were not randomized from the whole dataset of Tumblr posts about these AUs, but were gathered in the order posts appeared through the search engine under the filters “Top,” “All time,” and “All posts.” Although this sample is biased in an unfortunately opaque manner, sampling from the top of the Tumblr search engine using these filters produces relevant and currently popular content that reflects how *Undertale* fandom members in 2022 are able to view and interact with Tumblr content in an everyday context, making it useful for content analysis regarding community norms.

Analytic Technique

This study combines content analysis with a qualitative coding model inspired by template analysis. Rather than using the term discourse analysis, which is traditionally focused on spoken and written text, I use content analysis in the context of this study to emphasize how online media allows posts to ‘do’ things, as opposed to how print media ‘says’ things. My

content analysis of wiki pages, blogs, and Tumblr posts takes into account both textual and visual content alongside Tumblr post features such as links, tags, @s, and notes, and how particular wording and features act or allow certain actions regarding each post; the presence or absence of each of these factors contributes to the meaning and function of the post as a whole. I utilized template analysis to make sense of the data, an inductive coding methodology where, “rather than developing the full coding template prior to analyzing the data, researchers begin with a subset of data and as they begin to notice common themes emerging, they create a preliminary a priori template through which to begin analysis of the rest of the data” (Hodes, 2018, p. 77). I began my data analysis with an initial set of codes informed by my background as a fan as well as research into my sample AUs. While originally focusing on concepts of ownership and credit, I modified my template inductively to note different codes that appeared from the data such as “multiple AUs mentioned” or “specific AU names” over the course of my data collection and preliminary analyses. My final code list consisted of 31 items, determined through an iterative process of rereading my samples, creating new codes, and combining codes as needed. This list included categories of post features (for example links, asks, submissions, and @s), rhetorical moves (such as assertion of rights, self-promotion, interaction with other users), language patterns (distinguishing particularly patterns such as ‘canonicity’ words, ‘creatorship’ words, and ‘ownership’ words), and topical references (such as character name usage and AUs mentioned). Using this set of codes, I first worked through each 150-post AU dataset individually, then analyzed all 450 posts collectively to develop key themes. For example, the theme “languages of claims and credits” was developed from analyzing the codes “ownership claim,” “creatorship claim,” “character name usage,” “generic AU names,” “specific AU names,” “canonicity language,” “assertion of rights,” and “resignation of rights” (see

Appendix A for full code list). After this thematic coding, I performed a closer content analysis of some posts displaying these themes in order to dig into the deeper meanings expressed by posts through word choice and Tumblr mechanics. Posts for each AU were analyzed in relationship to each other, posts regarding other AUs, as well as ‘official’ announcements and information on that AU from original AU creators and fanwikis.

Introduction to the AUs: Underfell, Underswap, and Horrortale

Although Underfell, Underswap, and Horrortale are all long-standing and popular AUs deemed “community-owned” by the fandom, their creatorship and history differ drastically. In order to understand how credit and attribution is distributed in the fandom and who has authority over these AUs, it is necessary to provide background on their histories, including the individuals who are recognized as founding creators. This background is drawn from and includes a content analysis of the language used to describe AU creatorship on fan wikis and ‘official’ AU blogs. Not only are these platforms major hubs for fandom activity, but they carry significant authority within the fan community through symbolic and popular cultural capital, empowering their statements to shape broader fan discourse around creatorship, ownership, and canonicity for *Undertale* AUs. The capital and authority held by these platforms demonstrates some of the simultaneous adherence to and defiance of the wider economy that characterizes fandom’s shadow cultural economy: ‘Official’ AU blogs resemble copyright holders, but without legal frameworks to shore up their capital they must rely on popular recognition, while fan wikis are unauthorized creations of pseudonymous contributors which to some extent must rely on the symbolic capital imbued within the idea of a wiki to form initial trust with information-seekers (Kehler, 2017).

Underfell

Underfell is one of the oldest AUs popularized within the *Undertale* fandom, with initial concepts for the AU posted in October of 2015 (“Underfell”, n.d.). The basic premise of Underfell is ‘what if *Undertale* characters were evil?’ Where in the game *Undertale* the protagonist falls into a mountain to meet monsters who are primarily good at heart and face the main antagonist Flowey, in Underfell all the monsters are malicious while Flowey is the protagonist’s helper. Underfell is a mix between a contextualised and pure alternate universe, diverting significantly from the original *Undertale* story and characterization yet still resembling the original diegetic world. Underfell’s notoriety has inspired the usage of “Fell” within the fandom as a term referring to any AU with evil or murderous monsters (“Fell”, n.d.).

Underfell was created by Vic the Underfella, who published the original designs for the AU alongside the concept of an “undertale evil au” on October 16, 2015 (ricksancheeze, 2015). The AU began with character art of an evil version of the popular character Toriel, by October 22 gaining its name “Underfell” and expanding to a set of visual designs for 7 main characters: Papyrus, Sans, Toriel, Undyne, Alphys, Asgore, and Mettaton (underfell, 2015-c). Archived copies of official statements from the official Underfell blog (underfell.tumblr.com) from 2015 define Underfell as having “no set story/plotline or anything along those means” (underfell, 2015-b), being basically just a set of “evil” visual designs (underfell, 2015-a) from which anyone can interpret and create their own characterizations and storylines. After 2016, Vic abandoned the account due to personal issues as well as discomfort with harassment and NSFW (not-safe-for-work) content in the fandom, leaving the AU effectively community-shared (underfell, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Due to the ‘official’ Underfell AU consisting mainly of just designs without an active recognized creator during this period, much of what became the known and accepted

characterization and plot for the AU was fanon determined by fandom consensus. Vic later returned to the underfell.tumblr.com account July 2017, stating, “by the way this is the og underfell creator lol” (underfell, 2017-a); they have since posted both updated and new character designs for Underfell characters, as well as introducing actual backstory and storylines for the AU (underfell, 2019-a, 2019-b). However, as Vic explicitly declined to reclaim the AU, the wiki maintains that the Underfell AU is community-shared (“Underfell”, n.d.). Thus, while there is an ‘official’ canon Underfell as currently outlined by its original creator, which is distinct from and in some places contradicts previously established fanon understandings of the AU, Vic has tried to diminish any hierarchical valuations of different fanon interpretations, posting that other fans “don’t gotta stick with my canon !! Feel free to take it or leave it !” (underfell, 2017-b).

Vic the Underfella is credited on the *Undertale* AU wiki as “Author” as well as under “Contributors” as “Creator” and “Artist” (“Underfell”, n.d.). On the official Underfell Tumblr blog as of 2022, Vic claims legitimacy as the “Official UF Blog/Creator” (underfell, n.d.-a) as well as “the original UF creator” (underfell, n.d.-b). Both of these platforms notably avoid language such as “ownership” to instead highlight the artistic labour and creativity of the AU creator, emphasizing a fandom gift economy rather than financially concerned copyright. Vic has expressed disinterest in exerting any form of copyright or claim over the AU, stating that other fans can create whatever content they want, including monetized content such as merchandise or derivative AUs (FAQ). Vic also suggests that “if [fan creators] want, you can credit this blog!” (underfell, n.d.-b). This policy leaves decisions on whether credit is required entirely in the hands of fans. Vic expresses interest in being credited and notified about derivative Underfell works not as a matter of copyright, but that they “love seeing and listening to what is created for this AU!” (underfell, n.d.-b). Further, while they are not interested in seeing certain NSFW topics,

they do not attempt to exert any moral rights over the AU, stating that “whatever the hell you do on the internet is none of my business and never will be” (underfell, n.d.-b).

Vic makes the following public statement on the official Underfell blog regarding the canonicity of their writing and art for Underfell:

TECHNICALLY YES [this is the Canon Underfell], but also no. I had already given this AU up to everyone years ago, I’m not going to come back and reclaim it fully. Just giving fun facts and my own “canon” interpretation of how I saw the AU. (underfell, n.d.-b)

Vic makes it explicitly clear that other fan interpretations of the AU are valid and valued, and no-one is obliged to adhere to their ideas as an officially authorized canon; even putting “canon” into quotation marks to indicate the uncertainty in such a label (underfell, 2017-b). Despite having the prestige of original creatorship to support the legitimacy of their work regarding the AU, Vic has surrendered control over canonization processes to allow the wider fandom to collectively decide what the canon of the fanon concept “Underfell” is.

Underswap

Underswap, first published in October of 2015, is another influential early AU with the premise ‘what if certain *Undertale* characters swapped roles?’ (“Underswap”, n.d.). One of the best-known examples is the swap between the skeleton brothers, whose personalities are swapped from a lazy but powerful short skeleton (Sans) and an energetic and ambitious tall skeleton (Papyrus) to an energetic and ambitious short skeleton (Underswap Sans) and a lazy but powerful tall skeleton (Underswap Papyrus). Underswap is another mix between a contextualised and pure alternate universe, as while the AU cannot be said to divert from an event within canon, the AU’s ‘swap’ relies heavily on context from the original diegetic world. The Underswap

concept is well known within the *Undertale* fandom; variants of Underswap Sans have played major roles in many other popular fanon projects such as the official Error Sans comic and the animation series Underverse (“Errortale”, n.d.; “Underswap”, n.d.).

Underswap was created by Tumblr user p0pcornPr1nce, who proposed the idea of ‘swapped’ characters, produced visual art of AU character designs, and suggested some specific plot points for the story of the AU (“Underswap”, n.d.). Rather than a fleshed-out narrative or story, the AU was still mostly conceptual, meaning that a great deal of fan content for the AU would necessarily have to step outside the boundaries of official content from p0pcornPr1nce. The official Underswap Tumblr account’s About page responded to this with a statement that “you are free to make your own headcanons for certain swaps, it’s all open to interpretation” (underswapped, n.d.). The idea that Underswap canon is up to individual interpretation was only increased by ambiguity over whether swaps are ‘role’ or ‘personality’ based, as well as what exactly a ‘role’ is, with archived posts stating that “this isn’t a perfect personality swap, they all have some variation” (underswapped, 2016). This allowed for significant variation in personal interpretations of the Underswap world and characters, and the growth of popular fanon not reliant on official creator content. As the AU grew in notoriety, many fans fixated on Underswap Sans, popularizing a version with cute mannerisms referred to as “Blueberry;” while possibly more well-known than ‘official’ Underswap Sans as created by P0pcornPr1nce, Blueberry is noted by fan wikis as being fanon, with characteristics that directly contradict official content (“Underswap”, n.d.). P0pcornPr1nce has since left the fandom, deleted the official Underswap Tumblr account, and disavowed the AU, with no interest in continuing it (“Underswap”, n.d.). As a result, the *Undertale* AU wiki page for Underswap offers a notable disclaimer:

Unfortunately, this AU's original author has removed a lot of their work from existence, or some other entity has removed the AU. Therefore, the original source of the AU might not be available anymore, or the info might be scattered throughout the internet.

(“Underswap”, n.d.)

Underswap is recognized as a community-shared AU due to long-term abandonment by its original author and has been for several years (“Underswap”, n.d.). There are multiple derivative versions of Underswap which are not community-shared, however; many authors have continued the ‘swapping’ concept into separate AU works with original storylines and additional characterizations, some of which are relatively famous such as *Inverted Fate* by Dorked and *TS!Underswap* by Team Switched (“Underswap (disambiguation)”, n.d.). To distinguish itself from these, “the original AU is sometimes referred to as *Canonswap* or *Classicswap* by fans” (“Underswap”, n.d.). It is therefore clear that while the original AU concept by P0pcornPr1nce is recognized as ‘canon’ Underswap by the fandom, derivative works such as *Inverted Fate* and *TS!Underswap* are able to establish their own authorities, canons, and rules; although the original creator retains influence within the fandom, other fanon creators have been able to seize authorial power and thus symbolic and cultural capital through their versions of Underswap.

As the official Underswap Tumblr has been deleted, I performed a short analysis of the language around creatorship on the *Undertale* AU wiki page to provide some background on general fandom knowledge about the AU. The wiki notes p0pcornPr1nce as author, creator, and artist, as well as specifically “this AU's original author,” “the original creator of the AU” (“Underswap”, n.d.). This language avoids ownership claims to emphasize the creativity of the free fan work being done by the author, and through its usage of “original” simultaneously invites the existence of ‘current’ and ‘alternate’ creators and authors for the AU. The original is

special, but it is also discontinued and limited. The wiki refers to the term canon several times, calling on “the canon Underswap like it was originally intended to be,” noting “3 non-canon swaps that are commonly used in Underswap takes,” and saying certain content in “unofficial continuations... was never canon to the original” (“Underswap”, n.d.). According to the wiki, canon Underswap is only what was explicitly posted or accepted by p0pcornPr1nce. This dogged insistence on an AU canon created by the original creator seems somewhat specific to Underswap in particular and might be attributed to how fanon such as Blueberry or incestuous content is said to have caused p0pcornPr1nce to abandon the AU and delete AU content (“Underswap”, n.d.).

Horrortale

Horrortale is a well-known AU first published in January of 2016 (“Horrortale”, n.d.). Taking a completely different tone from the original game, Horrortale is a horror-story in which the originally good-hearted monsters have become monstrous due to wide-spread starvation, harsh leadership, and resulting cannibalism of humans. The AU stems from one of the multiple possible canon endings within *Undertale*, one in which the protagonist Frisk escapes from the Underground kingdom of monsters leaving most of the monsters trapped. Unlike Underfell or Underswap, it is firmly a contextualised alternate universe diverting from a specific point within *Undertale* canon and can even be seen as a fanmade sequel work to the game. The protagonist of Horrortale, unlike other AUs which focus on Frisk, is an original character called Aliza.

Horrortale was created by Sour Apple Studios, who originally posted a short concept comic on DeviantArt on January 16, 2016, comparing it to Underfell as being “less goth and more horror” (Sour-Apple-Studios, 2016-a). In February, Sour Apple Studios posted an animated video on YouTube of a faux game of the AU (Sour Apple Studios, 2016), before committing to a

long form serialized comic of the concept beginning in April of 2016 (Sour-Apple-Studios, 2016-b). The creator has also created an official flash game for Horrortale, with a teaser posted in 2016 and updated material shared in 2018 (sour-apple-studios, 2016, 2018). The official Horrortale AU is thus composed of not just visual designs and characterization notes but includes a detailed published storyline including character development. While the comic was originally posted on DeviantArt, later pages have also been posted on Sour Apple Studios' Tumblr account, the username and url of which was later changed from sour-apple-studios to horrortalecomic.tumblr.com (sour-apple-studios, 2020). As of March 28, 2022, "Book One" of Horrortale is complete, although Sour Apple Studios notes that they have plans to continue the project with a "Book Two" (horrortalecomic, 2022).

Sour Apple Studios is credited on the *Undertale* AU wiki as "Author" and "Creator," with links to their DeviantArt, Tumblr, and Twitter accounts, as well as the Newgrounds page the official Horrortale game is hosted on ("Horrortale", n.d.). Unlike Underfell and Underswap, the *Undertale* AU wiki does not label Horrortale as community shared ("Horrortale", n.d.). However, Sour Apple Studios maintains a journal post on their DeviantArt page which expresses an equivalent openness to fan community content:

You are welcome to use Horrortale however you like, as long as it follows Toby Fox's rules of merchandising. Basically, anything for free is totally fine (gifts, fanart, cosplay, fanfics, [etc.]) and anything for a cost is OK if it's not commercially sold (commissions, personalized buttons, hand-made stuff). (Sour-Apple-Studios, 2016-c)

This statement shows a clear relationship between the copyright policies around canon content set up by *Undertale*'s creator, Toby Fox, and practices of sharing fanon ideas within the fandom; as noted previously, copyright owners set tones for fandom culture. Their Tumblr

account, horroralecomic.tumblr.com, displays the following “About” claim as of May 5, 2022: “This is the official website for Horrortale, Book 1” (horroralecomic, n.d.). While the term “canon” is not used, usage of “official” claims symbolic capital within the fandom. Statements from the creator simultaneously emphasize their creative labour by calling Horrortale “my idea” (Sour-Apple-Studios, 2016-c) and “a comic I wrote and illustrated myself” (horroralecomic, n.d.) and offer explicit disclaimers about the AU’s status as a fanon idea based on the game *Undertale* by Toby Fox. The canon of Horrortale as an AU text is dominated by Sour Apple Studios as its creator, but this ‘canonicity’ does not behave according to legal systems of legitimacy and copyright. Rather than claiming any legal form of copyright or financial benefit from the AU directly, the creator positions themself to gain popular cultural capital within the fandom shadow cultural economy for sharing it freely with the fandom. At the same time, they make their commission information very visible on their Tumblr blog (horroralecomic, n.d.), allowing them to transform some of this popular cultural capital into economic capital while not directly exploiting the AU creation or ‘ownership’ itself.

Data Analysis

The data showed a lively *Undertale* fan population on Tumblr participating in AU fanon content creation, with 127 unique accounts appearing in the 450-post sample. Although this sample was gathered from the “Top” Tumblr search mechanism, post popularity as measured through notes varied widely, ranging from 16 to 13141 notes, with a mean of 1024 notes and a median of 756 notes per post. As by my judgement, anything over 500 notes is fairly popular on Tumblr, I believe this sample is generally representative of current popular fanon material within the *Undertale* fandom.

While not directly related to credit, one major pattern of behavior that appeared in the data was the inclusion of multiple AUs per post. Each post mentioned at least one AU, the keyword being searched, but out of the 450 Tumblr posts sampled overall, a full half included content for more than one AU. Moreover, when including more than one AU in a post, Tumblr users tended towards adding more AUs rather than stopping at just 2, reaching up to 28 in one post. The prevalence of AU mixtures illuminates how there are no separate AU fandoms such as an Underfell fandom or Underswap fandom, but rather a collective subcommunity within the *Undertale* fandom interested in *Undertale* AUs and interacting with a broad swath of fanon works. I also found that every single AU mentioned in a post was also tagged directly with the AU name, meaning that it would appear in search results for that AU. Furthermore, content analysis showed that in cases where Tumblr fans included credit to AU creators, they would generally include credit for each of the AUs mentioned. Thus, one motivation for including more AUs seems to be to increase the visibility and reach of one's posts, putting them into more search results and giving an excuse to reach out to well-known Tumblr users.

My qualitative analysis of these Tumblr posts, informed by fan wiki and official AU blog posts, revealed three overarching themes pertaining to fanon content creation and credit. Firstly, there are multiple layers of labour from different parties in the creation of fanon content, and these contributors are treated unequally in regard to credit and ability to transform their work into capital. However, unlike officially published texts where authority is concentrated in copyright holders, working with fanon content allowed creators and contributors from multiple layers to claim the symbolic and cultural capital-laden title of 'canon.' Secondly, the data supports that credit claims of 'creatorship' and 'ownership' of creative work and intellectual property are treated differently within the fandom as opposed to official legal systems of

ownership. Language use leaned firmly towards claiming popular cultural capital for creative work, rather than economic capital, although user behaviour still retained echoes of capitalist copyright. Unlike the original-creatorship centrality of copyrighted works, the interpretability of these AUs as fanon concepts produced a distinct openness allowing a variety of users to stake a claim and establish their own ‘canons.’ Finally, the data showed that the act of crediting serves both the giver and the receiver within the fandom cultural economy, with Tumblr fans encouraged to interact with other users. Fans are incentivized to support fanon creators in canonizing their AU works, as their investment of symbolic capital is reciprocated with social and popular cultural capital.

Layers of Labour in Fanon Content Creation: Whose Work Gets Credit?

The first theme that became apparent from my analysis was that there are multiple parties who contribute to any given post of fanon content, and that not all of those parties receive credit, or receive credit unequally for their labour. The five layers of labour can be distinguished as follows: the author of the official work that inspired the fandom (in this study *Undertale* and Toby Fox), the creator of an original AU concept such as Underfell or Underswap, the author of a particular interpretation/version of the AU or an AU character, the artist or writer who created the content of the post, and the Tumblr user who posted it on their blog. Each of these parties can also be considered as having a claim (if not necessarily an equal one) on the authority to canonize the fanon material; due to its fanon nature, those actors who receive credit gain more authority over the popularity contest that drives the canonization process of an AU. While the official author Toby Fox and the Tumblr poster are known and visible entities for every post, credit for the work on other layers varied. With a handful of exceptions, if a post included credit for AU concepts it would provide either original creatorship or specific version creatorship, not

both. One individual may occupy multiple of these layers, such as the official Horrortale creator's Tumblr posting a comic written and drawn by themselves as the creator of the original AU concept, but it is also possible that a different party may have been responsible for each layer, as in the case of one user posting the art of another creator based on a specific AU interpretation by a third user who is not the original AU creator. These patterns of unequal credit distribution influence and are influenced by the distribution of symbolic and popular cultural capital within the fandom, and shape which parties get a say in what is canon and valuable.

To the Artist Go The Spoils: Widespread Artistic Credit on Tumblr

I found that it was extremely common for the creators of post content to be credited; specifically, Tumblr creators had a high rate of including credit to themselves, with the vast majority of posts displaying explicit textual, tagged, or visually embedded signatures demonstrating their claim over their direct artistic labour. Although explicit credit only reached 80%, more subtle contextual clues suggest that almost all the posts within the sample were both created by and posted online by the same people; you can generally assume that the Tumblr blog source automatically linked to a post created the piece of media that you are enjoying. Only one post out of the sample was clearly mismatched between post content creatorship and Tumblr blogger, being a repost of multiple pieces of art from linked artists on both Twitter and Tumblr. This fan behavior is reflective of a general website culture; as Tumblr has the prominent reblog feature which allows users to share content without disconnecting it from credit, reposting is frowned upon. This understanding that visible post creators are the makers of their own artistic content means that each fanon content post garners its creator/artist additional popular cultural capital for their effort and skill. Regardless of canonicity or creatorship of the AU concept, artists (visual or otherwise) who build on fanon get credit and capital for the work they post. A number

of Tumblr posts also demonstrated efforts by artists to transform that popular cultural capital into economic capital by including links in their posts to financial platforms such as commissions, ko-fi tipping accounts, and/or Patreon subscription services; not seeking money for fanon concepts, but for the time and labour they put into creating and sharing their writing and art.

No Credit Necessary – Some Credit Wanted

In contrast to the prevalence of artistic credit, the majority of posts (71%) do not provide credit for AU concepts, whether original AU ideas or specific interpretations. This shows that it is not strictly necessary within the fandom to give credit for fanon ideas; those who refrain do not seem to face any particular consequences in terms of popular cultural capital, with no clear correlation between credit and number of post notes. One possible explanation for this is that, because the labour that goes into creating AU ideas is less visible compared to the direct artistic work that results in a particular image to be posted, they are less valued, and it is less important that their creators receive credit and thus fandom cultural capital. By not including credit to other concept creators, the individual Tumblr poster makes themselves and their work a greater focus and thus deserving of reward. Furthermore, by not crediting any specific version of the AU, the user's fanon work becomes entered into the general public consciousness of the AU concept, thus allowing any contributor to influence the popularity contest that drives AU canonization. However, it is also possible that the lack of explicit credit towards AU concept creators is because fans believe their creatorship is already obvious and known (or at least easily researched) within the fandom. This proposition is particularly supported by one post's somewhat obtuse method of credit: "all characters belong to their respective owners."

The Perplexing Visibility and Invisibility of ‘Official’ Creatorship

Original creators and their official blogs seem to be made both hyper-visible and invisible within the regular behavior of Tumblr users. Even though their status is symbolically rich with authority over AU canonization decisions, they do not exert much influence in the popular sample. In contrast to the emphasis on original creatorship by fanwikis, only 28 Tumblr posts of the 450 sampled include credit to the original AU concept creators for Underfell, Underswap, and Horrortale, and only 34 in total provide credit for any AU concept originators. While no posts from the official Underfell blog appeared in this popular sample, and the official Underswap blog is long deleted, 14 posts were pages from the official Horrortale comic posted on horrortalecomic.tumblr.com; the original creator of Horrortale can be seen to retain a high profile and considerable social/cultural capital within the fandom community. While a low percentage provide credit for original AUs, there are notable patterns within this crediting behavior that might explain who is prioritized by fans and why.

Underfell fans seem to have taken full advantage of the AU’s community-owned status, with only two posts out of the sample giving credit to the official creator of Underfell, and only in text form, not @ form, which would notify the blog mentioned. While this could be taken as fandom disinterest in crediting the AU creator, this ignores the fact that the official creator of Underfell also goes by the very username *underfell*; in this particular case, as the official creator is obvious, any further claim might just be seen as redundant. Fan behavior in regard to Horrortale creatorship supports this idea, as 5 posts give credit specifically to the username *sour-apple-studios*, one credits only the new username *horrortalecomic*, and one names both “@horrortalecomic (old: @sour-apple-studios).” The prevalence of credit to Sour Apple Studios rather than the current blog title could be ascribed to fans being accustomed to crediting the old

blog and continuing in that vein, but it could also be because the current blog title is obvious to the point of credit being redundant; just as Underfell seems obviously claimed by blogger underfell, Horrortale is clearly by horrortalecomic. The higher proportion of credit to Sour Apple Studios might imply that credit is more commonly given within the *Undertale* fandom when fanon creators have usernames which are not directly related to their fanon concepts.

Underswap's sample continues in the same vein with AU credit given to the username p0pcornpr1nce rather than the former official Underswap blog; however, the situation is further complicated by the creator's abandonment of the AU. Only 5 posts included attribution for the original AU concept Underswap, rather than a version of Underswap. While two posts credit p0pcornpr1nce by username, three give credit to the *Undertale* "AU community," even as they include specific usernames for other AUs in the post. Cutting p0pcornpr1nce out of the narrative might be an attempt to respect their complete disavowal and disinterest in the AU, but it also suggests an understanding by some members of the Tumblr portion of *Undertale* fandom that Underswap 'canon' is in fact determined by the community. Unlike Underfell, where Vic retains authority due to their creatorship and is active within the fandom to say that 'this is canon and that is fanon,' through this perspective roughly everyone within the fandom has the same authority and influence over Underswap fanon; the canon 'text' of the AU is a group effort and there are many who deserve credit and the capital rewards inherent rather than just one.

Despite the low rate of explicit crediting to the 'official' creators of these AUs, they remain very prominent within the fandom on other sites and as blog results on the Tumblr search. The lack of credit within Tumblr posts might be because fans assume that official or original 'canon' creators are well known and don't require repeating; Toby Fox, for instance, is literally only credited as the creator of *Undertale* by one blogger in this sample. From this

perspective, official AU concept-text collections are being treated as fan objects akin to the official game which inspired the fandom. Where Toby Fox's policies do not require fans to constantly give credit to him for their transformative work, the AU creators have followed and allowed their layer of labour to be built on without credit as well, with their status and power within the fandom as original creators staying untouchable simply due to being the original creators rather than regular crediting. This view is certainly possible, fitting fairly well into common legal conceptions of original creatorship and rights-holding, but there remains the possibility that users do not give credit to 'official' concepts because fans view original AU creators and their 'canon' decisions as irrelevant. Instead, AU content creation seems to open up possibilities for contributors at other levels of labour to claim power over canonization.

More Appealing Fanons: Fan Canonization of Specific AU Interpretations

Where original AU creatorship is only sporadically credited, the designers and writers of specific AU interpretations have received a relatively high proportion of credit and regard. 106 posts, 23% of the sample, included explicit credit for specific character designs, storylines, and/or derivative AU versions. 38 of these version credit cases were declarations from artist-posters that their content was representative of their own personal version of the AU, while 68 gave credit for the fanon concepts inspiring their work to other users who were not official AU creators. While self-crediting can be considered a matter of self-interest, with some of these users including links to financial platforms allowing them to transform the popularity of their ideas into economic capital, it is intriguing that Tumblr fans were apparently giving credit to various AU version creators about twice as often as original AU creators. The obvious reason for this would be that while the official AU creators for Underfell, Underswap, and Horrortale have made statements that their concepts can be used freely without credit, version creators generally

have not. Another possible explanation for version crediting is that, while original AU creators are well known and easily researchable, specific versions and their creators are less visible, and it is both informational and polite to give them a boost.

It should be noted that it was possible to distinguish original AU creatorship from version creatorship not just through knowledge of a list of ‘official’ creators, but through the language that Tumblr posters used; phrases such as “[username]’s version/character” and “my Underswap/Underfell” as opposed to just Underswap or Underfell made no attempt to claim the AU ‘canon’ as a whole, only a specific portion of fanon content. Version credits acknowledge that no, this is not necessarily what the original AU creator has decided is canon, but they also declare that credited creators have the power to determine their own canons for their own AU versions. Underswap posts show the highest proportion of version credit, likely linked to the original creator’s complete abandonment of the AU and thus the lack of a central unifying ‘canon,’ as well as attempts to avoid being associated with the denigrated “fanon Underswap.”

While AU version creators recognize that they are not the original creators, the nature of fanon and canon within the fandom context means that versions have the ability to dominate over original AUs. That is, it is possible for one person’s unofficial Underswap interpretation to be more liked or more credited by the fandom than the original AU, making it more influential over the shared fanon. As an example, one specific fanon game (*Bonely Hearts Club*, to be referred to as *BHC*), a dating sim focusing on interpretations of Underfell, Underswap, Horrortale, and Swapfell characters, is remarkably popular within the fandom; it is credited by 24 posts out of the 450-post sample, more than any of the original AU creators alone or combined. I believe that the large amount of credit for this particular fanon concept is largely due to how *BHC* serves as a detailed ‘canon’ text for AU content to build from that is both more detailed than the limited

materials provided by original creators and avoids the issues of pedophilic or incestual accusations within general AU fanon. *BHC* is an extremely influential part of the body of AU transtexts and its AU interpretations are currently more prominently credited by Tumblr fans than original concepts. This example shows how creators of AU versions and interpretations are able to claim a form of canonicity and popular cultural capital within the fan community without having to make claims of original creatorship or transfer that the legal system would require. As fans give credit to fanon creators, they invest symbolic and popular cultural capital into their works and their online personas, which can result in both the canonization of particular AU works through popular acclaim and the establishment of their creators as legitimate authorities within the fandom who both have power over AU canonization processes.

Languages of Claims and Credits in Fandom: Remixing Creatorship/Ownership

The second theme that emerged from the data was that while ‘creatorship’ is tightly linked with ‘ownership’ of creative fanon concepts within the fandom, this fan ‘ownership’ does not actually adhere to legal systems of intellectual property ownership even as it echoes them. A notable part of ‘creatorship’ and ‘ownership’ within the fandom was actioned through naming, giving specific names to fanon ideas such as derivative AU versions and character designs. Even as Tumblr users claimed creator-ownership of their ideas and labour, they tended not to use the terms ‘official’ or ‘canon’ to try and increase their prestige, freely admitting their work was fanon. While the general attitude of the *Undertale* fandom is shaped by owner/creators resigning rights over their work, it is not necessarily a complete share and share alike culture, with some notable claims of property rights that mimic legal systems of copyright and moral rights. The fanon nature of AUs was accepted within the fandom as additional value for fans who participated in content creation, rather than acting as a detriment. Fanon’s separation from

legally backed copyright ownership allowed a wide variety of creators to stake their claims on their work to obtain popular cultural and symbolic capital from other fans.

Claiming Fanon: Intertwined Creatorship/Ownership

Analysis of language patterns showed that when Tumblr fans made claims on or gave credit for fanon concepts, those claims expressed both creatorship and ownership of the fanon. Firstly, while I defined two distinct codes for creatorship claims (labour words such as “by,” “designed,” “drew,” “wrote”) and ownership claims (expressed through possessive language such as “belongs to,” “mine,” or “[username]’s”) intending to do a closer content analysis after coding, I found that Tumblr users actually utilized creatorship and ownership language interchangeably. Underfell both belonged to @underfell and was by Vic the Underfella, Horrortale was both created by @sour-apple-studios and was owned by Sour Apple Studios. While many posts followed the patterns “AU by @username” and “AU belongs to @username,” several users also gave credit solely by including “AU: @username” or even just adding “@username” without either creatorship or ownership language; this shows how explicit creatorship and ownership language became unnecessary within the *Undertale* Tumblr fandom because crediting using the @username feature was a community norm and it is understood that those credited are both creators and ‘owners’ of their concepts. This does notably contrast the language used by fan wikis. Where the *Undertale* AU wiki carefully avoided ownership words, the Tumblr fandom operated assuming that creatorship and ownership were intertwined.

Naming as Claim

In addition to the obvious AU claims mentioned above, one interesting behavior within the fandom was the usage of naming as a tool to express creator-ownership. To elaborate, within the context of AU canons, characters go by the same names as their canon *Undertale*

counterparts; however, within the fandom as a whole this creates confusion between AU counterparts such as “Sans” (*Undertale* version) and “Sans” (Underfell version). Sans and Papyrus, being some of the most common characters mentioned by posts within the sample and focused on by a considerable amount of *Undertale* AU content, served as useful subjects in examining patterns of naming behavior and what it means to use certain names. The most common form of naming was appending the AU name after character name, for example, “sans underfell.” Another common form of naming is the usage of popular shared fanon names, such as “Blue” or “Blueberry” for Underswap Sans or “Horror” for Horrortale Sans. Tumblr posters using these forms did not exert a claim over the character or AU, leaving viewers to assume their work was based on an established canon (for an AU, this would notably be open to both popular fanons and ‘official’ canons). In contrast, several users gave specific and unique names to specific personal versions of AU characters, such as “Sky” for one person’s Underswap Sans and “Slate” for a version of Horrortale Sans. Unique names were usually accompanied with explicit creator-ownership claims, but in rare cases they appeared on their own. For instance, one artist with a particularly unique Underfell Papyrus design tagged their work Underfell Papyrus, but specifically calls the character pictured “Paprika.” They do not, notably, add any flavour of possessive language to their post; the act of providing a unique name alone lays claim to this character and design as their Paprika, not the common fanon Underfell Papyrus. Naming itself is an act of creative labour, making obvious the less visible intellectual work that *Undertale* fans do in developing fanon concepts and establishing creatorship. Giving specific names to derivative versions and character designs allowed unofficial fan-creators to separate their work from original AU canons and declare their own; naming allows for the reinterpretation of a Tumblr user’s fanon post from acting as a transformational fanwork about Underfell Sans whose canon

and ownership belong to Underfell to a post about, for example, the derivative character “Jasper,” whose canon is determined by Jasper’s creator. Unique names emphasized the importance of a fan creator’s creative work and the power they held over defining their interpretations of both character and AU. Declaring specific names served as an exercise of non-official and lesser-known fanon creators’ authority to declare what AU canon is, and the commonality of these activities in the popular sample shows that the fan community generally recognized and accepted that other fans had this authority.

No Need for Canonicity

Even as users expressed their claims over fanon concepts, very few posts within the sample made claims of canonicity or other official status, with a much larger amount actually disclaiming canon. For instance, a full third of posts included text or tags explicitly labelling their work as “undertale au” related, language emphasizing that each AU (though consisting of its own fan-canon) is at its roots, a fanon concept based on the original game *Undertale* rather than an officially published canon. Several posts openly used the word “headcanon” (a personal fanon interpretation) or even the explicit word “fanon” to express that their AU concepts were not officially legitimized. Posters were unashamed to tag their posts things like “#idc how ooc [Out Of Character, or non-canon] this is” and “#i still don’t know the [AU canon] i do not care i do not see it,” and still received hundreds of notes on their work. Embracing fanon meant that *Undertale* AU fans were neither required to follow the authority of official copyright holders, nor obey strict canons as set out by ‘official’ creators to receive capital from their fellow fans. The prevalence of these behaviors shows that users did not view this fanon nature as a negative to be obscured; despite the value imbued into canonicity, fanon content was also popular, valuable, and better yet, anyone could define it and become a figure of authority over it.

Limited Echoes of Intellectual Property Legalities

Even though this sample shows Tumblr fans claiming both creatorship and ownership of their fanon creations, this ownership is generally not expressed in the same way as legal ownership of official intellectual properties. Authors of original works under most Western legal systems hold both copyright and moral rights over their work: legal copyright can be understood as an exclusive right over the reproduction and derivative works of a copyrighted work, while moral rights refer to both a right to be credited as author and to prevent uses of the work that would tarnish it or its author's reputation (Stendell, 2005). Legal copyright holders are generally understood to have the ability to litigate against fan work for copyright or moral rights infringement (Stendell, 2005); in the *Undertale* fandom's case, Toby Fox's permissive policies mean that fans do not have to fear that the official creator/owner's disapproval will be enforced. This lack of copyright enforcement upon *Undertale* itself seems to have trickled down into fan culture in how fans make derivative works based on fanon concepts like AUs; only a handful of posts invoked copyright through phrases such as "no reposting" or "[creating derivative works] requires permission," while slightly more drew on moral rights in demanding that other users "not tag as ship" in rejection of incestuous interpretations of their work. However, these cases were few and unenforced by any legal penalty; in contrast to the economic motivation implied within legal copyright, the owner-creators of fanon ideas do not attempt to make financial profit from this 'ownership' by restricting or charging for reproduction or derivations. *Undertale* AU fans generally did not express either of these rights over their fanon work, instead posting them without stipulations to be shared freely. Further, members of the fandom including the original creators of AUs such as Vic the Underfella and Sour Apple Studios have made statements explicitly waiving even moral rights over their ideas (Sour-Apple-Studios, 2016-c; underfell,

n.d.-b). On the other hand, this act of formally relinquishing rights over these fanon concepts produces the somewhat paradoxical implication that fanon creator/owners do in fact have rights over their work, as they must be given up. It seems that creators of *Undertale* fanon content do possess rights similar to copyright and moral rights, but these operate within a particular fandom culture in which nobody expects these rights to be enforced and thus they are not taken particularly seriously; it is polite to acknowledge creators, but not required. Thus, within the *Undertale* fandom's shadow cultural economy, fanon creators and contributors are empowered to reproduce, transform, derive from, and lay claim to fanon concepts such as AUs to claim transformable cultural and symbolic capital without facing the reprisal that similar actions towards copyrighted canonical works might face in broader society.

The Benefits of Giving Credit: Socialization and Fan-Identity Affirmation

While receiving credit for fanon concepts and labour has obvious benefits as explored in previous sections, the prevalence of giving credit to others even when it is not required within the Tumblr *Undertale* fandom reaffirms that users who give credit also receive value from this behavior. As fanon creators claim power over AU works, other fans are incentivized to support them not only for the chance of obtaining similar support in return, but also because the fandom's shadow cultural economy provides credit-givers with social and popular cultural capital in return for their investment of symbolic capital into other fanon creators. My analysis showed that providing credit for fanon ideas often serves as a form of social interaction, in some cases resulting in increased post visibility. Tumblr fans have good reason to give credit and respect other users' authority as it serves to build social connections and increase the reach of their work. Furthermore, providing credit was shown to be a normalized behavior within the fandom allowing users to demonstrate their fan knowledge and build popular cultural capital by

doing so. Within the Tumblr fandom, the benefits of giving credit were highlighted by usage of Tumblr's @ function, with its ability to directly contact other Tumblr users.

@ Me Next Time: Credit as Socialization

One pattern that emerged was that giving credit can be used to seek attention and visibility from other fans; giving credit in @ form to another Tumblr user is particularly notable in this. Firstly, as an @ directly notifies the person/s being credited, they are very likely to view the post in question. Secondly, in the case that they have viewed the post, they are then obligated by politeness (or interest, as many AU concept creators are very fond of their AUs) to like or reblog it – which would expand the reach of the post to all of their followers. These benefits could be compounded by @ing more creators, and in fact as many Tumblr fans included multiple AUs in their posts, in cases where they gave credit, they would generally credit all possible relevant AU creators. For example, one post included credit in @ form to 28 different Tumblr users, massively increasing its visibility. Considering this, giving credit to as many and as popular fanon creators as possible would be very rewarding for a Tumblr poster, boosting their work and profile within the community to increase both symbolic and popular cultural capital. However, taking advantage of another's widespread popularity is not the only motivation behind credit, as many posters did not only give credit to well known or popular fanon creators but a wide variety of lesser known but more active Tumblr users. Instead, several tied their crediting to their social bonds with the creator mentioned; 19 of such posts used the tag “#friend tag” to emphasize the relationship. A good number of Tumblr posters indicated that their usage of other creators' fanon concepts in their work was intended as a gift for the pleasure of the recipient. As most crediting utilized the @ function, a post containing fanon content could be used to directly interact with another user, either opening a conversation or maintaining a bond. Crediting

behavior can be understood as a way to maintain and build relationships with other fans; while friendship has many values, this relationship-building can also be considered as acquiring social capital by investing symbolic capital in another fanon creator.

Cultural Capital, Credit, and the Broken @

As giving credit is a normalized behavior within the *Undertale* AU fan community, posters who include credit are demonstrating not just knowledge of fan trivia regarding official creatorship of AU concepts, but knowledge of the norms within the fandom. Looking at it this way, giving credit can be seen as a desirable, ‘tasteful’ behavior within the fandom cultural economy, and fans are incentivized to support other fanon creators as it helps build their own popular cultural capital. This is exemplified the most not by crediting in the common forms of simple text or the @ function, but by a significant behavior I call the “broken @;” where writing @username directly contacts a creator, several users instead wrote non-functional versions such as @/username, or @.username, which prevents the notification of the Tumblr user mentioned. That is to say, a notable amount of Tumblr *Undertale* fans gave credit in a form that mimicked the most common form of credit but did not provide the special visibility benefits of that form. The broken @ is a demonstration of knowledge of the fandom norm and thus fan identity that avoids bothering the credited creators, building a credit-giver’s cultural capital through valuably ‘tasteful’ behaviour within this fandom’s shadow cultural economy. The fan community is thus incentivized to invest symbolic and popular cultural capital into *Undertale* AU fanon creators whether they get a direct response or not, benefiting from behaving ‘like a fan.’

Conclusions

Within the *Undertale* fandom’s shadow cultural economy, the symbolic and popular cultural capital imbued within the prestigious concept of canon is highly sought-after – even

when working with non-canonical material like fanon. While even ‘official’ fanon does not have the legitimate power of official canon supported by economically driven copyright law, it is clear that fanon content is valuable within the shadow cultural economy of the fandom, as *Undertale* fans both enjoy and benefit from participating in shared fanon creations such as AUs. Although original creatorship and ‘official’ canons hold significant influence, AU canons are established through the investment of symbolic and cultural capital from the general fandom community, making credit key in the canonization process. Further, as creatorship of fanon concepts is more ambiguous than that of *Undertale* itself, credit is required for fan creators to benefit from their intellectual and artistic labour. However, although credit is common and normalized within the Tumblr fandom, it is also distributed unequally, letting some kinds of fans benefit from their work more than others. Even so, while the fandom does perpetuate certain inequalities, credit and its many benefits in the forms of symbolic and popular cultural capital, is notably not only given to legal owners or original creators who make 'official canon' for AUs but is in fact more commonly directed to derivative and transformative fanon content creators – opening up possibilities for any fan creator’s personal fanon ideas to become canonized within the fandom. Working with fanon concepts such as AUs allows creators who might otherwise be dismissed as unoriginal and unofficial by legal systems of ownership to lay claim on canonicity, as the separation between non-canon, fanon, and canon regarding any fanon concept is inherently ambiguous. *Undertale* AU fans on Tumblr, both creators and consumers, used credit for fanon concepts such as AUs as a declaration of both creatorship and ownership, a seizure of the power to determine canon and the right to receive credit for their work. While this fanon ‘ownership’ echoes legal systems of copyright ownership, fans did not attempt to aggressively enforce their rights; instead, they more passively relied on the culture within the fandom that encouraged

passively expected respect for them as creators. Fan ‘ownership’ in this sense was used as a claim on cultural capital rather than economic capital, not used for financial gain like licensing a legally owned copyright but served as a way to emphasize creatorship and the creative labour that went into fanon creation. Within this fandom’s shadow cultural economy, ownership was not transformable into economic capital, but creatorship’s popular cultural capital is. Answering the question of why other fans would bother to invest symbolic and cultural capital into AU creators, the act of giving credit was shown as beneficial to those investing symbolic capital as well as those receiving it within the fandom; credit-giving offered opportunities to build social capital through interactions with other Tumblr users and to bolster their popular cultural capital by increasing post visibility, following the norms of the fan community, and demonstrating their knowledge of who deserves credit. Popular, active Tumblr users were credited often due to their ability to boost post visibility, showing that those who already hold symbolic and popular cultural capital within the fandom are likely to receive more. Even so, those who hold capital rely on fan investment, and it should be recognized that members of the general population of fans, rather than just copyright holders or ‘official’ blogs and creators, hold significant power and can obtain significant rewards within the fandom – and in some cases, the ability to transform this fandom-specific capital into economic capital through monetization of their work.

This case illustrates the importance of considering platform in studying online community norms, as Tumblr’s @ function plays a key role in the *Undertale* fandom’s crediting behavior and its implications. Other subcommunities of the fandom will no doubt have different cultures and expectations based on the features and capabilities of their host websites; not to mention that other fandoms should be understood to have unique cultures influenced by their particular history of platforms. Furthermore, while this research may focus on one specific

fandom case study, it helps shed light on how capital within a fandom can be distributed; understanding how the shadow cultural economies of fandom function has become more and more critical with the increasing popularization of fan activity and the mainstreaming of fandom in online spaces (Guo, 2018). In the modern online world, fan culture has become a huge target for commodification, and while a fairly low proportion of participants in this case study attempted transforming their popular cultural capital into economic capital, the financially concerned (and thus legally concerned) dimensions of fan activity require focus as they enter the mainstream. The status of fanon concepts as shown by this study, being slightly detached from legal ownership of canon and instead facing competing and overlapping claims from many fan-creators, presents interesting implications for copyright law which have not yet been put to the test. Further research might investigate ways in which legal forms of ownership have interfered with fanon ‘ownership,’ as well as how fanon claims can interfere with each other.

While this study utilized a hands-off digital ethnographic approach and content analysis to consider what already-existing data showed of the *Undertale* Tumblr fandom culture with some interesting theme results, future researchers in this area should consider utilizing interactive data collection techniques such as participant interviews in order to understand the driving thought-processes, beliefs, and values behind these fan behaviors. Ultimately, the case of *Undertale* fanon on Tumblr demonstrates that fandoms are neither monolithic nor utopic, and that fan culture requires much more exploration to understand how it functions intertwined with modern capitalist systems to produce both benefits and exploitation.

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Appendix A
***Undertale* Tumblr Fandom Code List**

Assertion of Rights	Multiple AUs Mentioned
Moral Rights	Derivative AUs
Copyright	Multiple Different AUs
Resignation of Rights	Character Name Usage
Self-Promotion	Generic AU Names
Financial Links	Specific AU Names
Fanon Concept Claim	Fanon Concept Information
Creatorship Claim	Fanfiction Links
Ownership Claim	Tumblr Info Posts
No Stated Claim	Inspirational Material Links
Canonicity language	User Interactions
Credit to Self	Asks and Submissions
Credit as Direct @	Collaborations
Credit as Broken @	Commissions
Credit as Text Only	Free Requests and Gifts
No Credit Given	