

Tracing “My Hero Academia” Fandom Composing Practices in a Seventh-Grade Superhero Storytelling Project

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This paper describes the work of three seventh-grade students in a semester-long superhero storytelling project in a midwestern middle school during spring semester 2019. In this paper, the researchers report their analysis of ethnographic data collected during this project to demonstrate how these three authors, who were all fans of the anime and manga franchise My Hero Academia (MHA), brought practices from their MHA fanfiction writing into their superhero storytelling. Using theories of transmedial narratology, the researchers identify three distinct practices this group described as part of their out-of-school fanfiction writing: character deck-creation, queer romantic (re)couplings, and participatory storytelling. They then trace these practices in the superhero story this group created to describe how these practices influenced their narrative. The researchers argue that teachers and teacher educators should see students’ fan fictional practices not only as legitimate reading and writing but also as challenges to the way they conceptualize narrative in schools.

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On a Friday, in a middle school library, in the spring semester of 2019, three seventh-grade students, Kiana, Melissa, and Rene, looked at something on Melissa's phone. "I thought that was Victor," Kiana noted as she looked at the image on the phone, and Rene explained to first author Beth Krone, "Victor's from an anime." Beth nodded. She was aware of (although not familiar with) this genre of animated television shows from Japan, which are often accompanied by graphic novel series called manga. "Yuri! On Ice," Kiana joyfully declared, naming the anime Rene referenced.

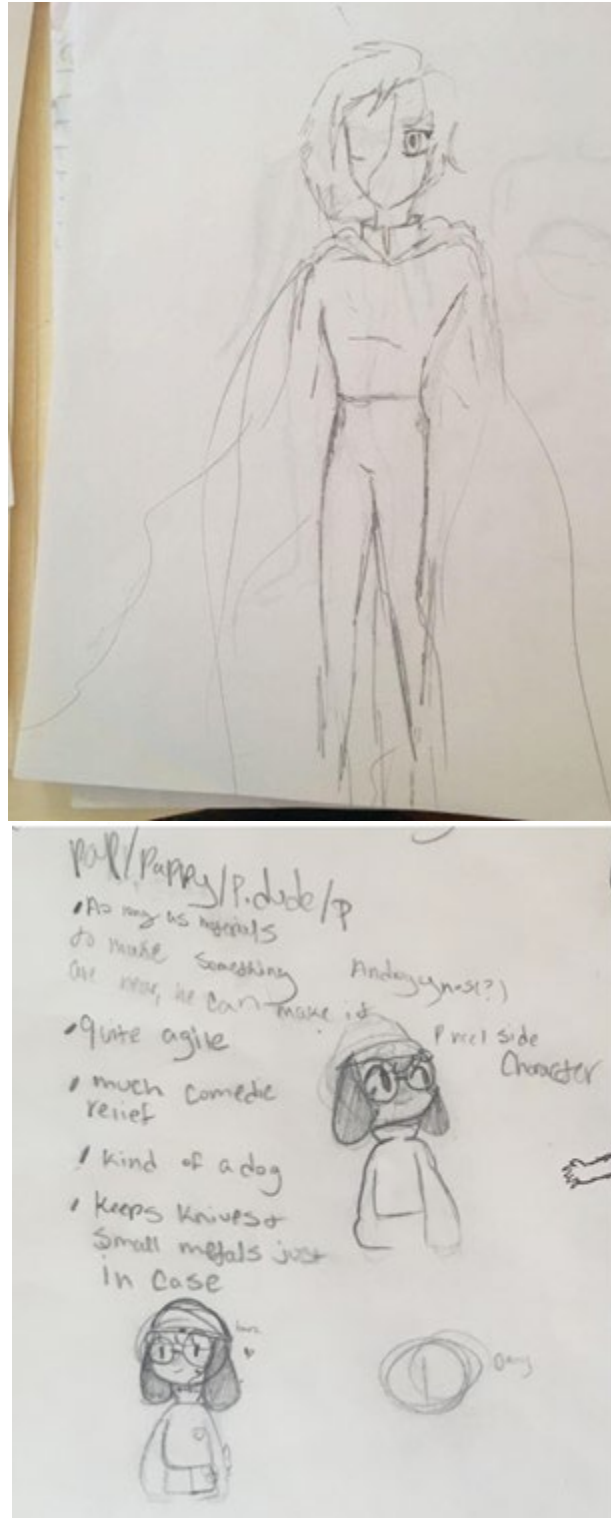
This show follows two ice skaters, Victor and Yuri, whose competition turns into queer romantic tension. Kiana and Melissa then googled clips from some of their other favorite anime shows to show Beth. "Why do you guys think anime is so popular right now?" Beth asked, and Kiana replied, "Well, I mean, it's nice." When Beth followed up about what made it nice, Kiana replied, "The art, the characters," before turning back to the clips on Melissa's phone.

Kiana, Rene, and Melissa's conversation with Beth about anime was part of a larger, twice-weekly, semester-long superhero storytelling project that we conducted in collaboration with seventh-grade English language arts (ELA) teachers in Mountview Middle School, a public middle school in a large midwestern city. We have conducted two other iterations of this storytelling project, and in these iterations, students used textual resources from video games, movies, cartoons, and comic books to tell their stories (Enciso et al., 2023; Enciso & Krone, 2022; Krone, 2019). However, Rene, Kiana, and Melissa were the first group of youth authors to tell a story that was largely inspired by and linked to their out-of-school anime fanfiction writing. Initially, the influences of anime and manga on the group's storytelling were only indirectly apparent in their side conversations about anime shows they loved and in Kiana and Rene's drawings of their characters, which mirrored manga and anime art styles (see Figure 1 for Kiana and Rene's initial drawings and Figure 2 for Rene's final drawings, located later in this article).

However, in our fifth session working together, Rene mused that the superhero characters the group was creating should "live in a universe where everyone has quirks. Only 30% of people do not have superpowers." "Maybe we should make this like a fandom?" he asked, and when Beth asked what he was referring to, he replied, "It's a show," before continuing his world-building. It was only at the midpoint of our project that Rene revealed *which* anime and manga show he was referencing. When, in this interview, Beth asked about where the group drew inspiration for their story, Rene explained,

I actually took inspiration from My Hero Academia. 80% of the population has quirks, and 20% doesn't, and the main character, Deku, was born quirkless, and I don't want to spoil it, because people listening to this might want to read.

Figure 1
Initial Drawings of Pap and Paradox



The *My Hero Academia* (*MHA*) manga and anime series depicts a world where a majority of people have “quirks” or superpowers, and it describes a school (U.A. Academy) that youth attend to hone these powers. Rene explained that he and Melissa wrote *MHA* fanfiction, which they shared on the popular platform, Wattpad, an online site where fans can post and read fanfiction. It was only once Rene noted that this story was a “fandom” of *MHA* that we began to notice other resonances between this anime/manga series and students’ storytelling.

At the time of this project, we, like many K-12 teachers, knew little about the many anime shows students referenced, and the specific anime and manga series, *MHA*, that served as the key inspiration for this group’s superhero storytelling. As the adult facilitator who worked with this group and scribed this group’s story, Beth proceeded with this project without an understanding of the specific fandoms the youth authors were engaged in. It was only at the end of this project that Pat obtained the first book of the *MHA* series, and we, together, began to think about how their fanfiction composing specifically impacted Kiana, Rene, and Melissa’s collaborative storytelling.

In the 6 years since this storytelling project occurred, we have presented this work at conferences like the National Council of Teachers of English, and we have spoken to friends, colleagues, and students who love anime, in general, and *MHA*, in particular. While we still feel like novices in describing the anime fandoms that inspired this group of youth authors, we also recognize that, 6 years later, anime is increasingly popular in the out-of-school lives of youth (Aoki, 2024; Brzeski, 2022). This piece serves as both an investigation into the specific influences of anime fandom practices in youths’ narrative fiction writing and an invitation for others, particularly members of anime fandom communities, to contribute their own perspectives on these influences.

As English educators, we encourage our preservice teachers to think about texts students are both producing and consuming in online spaces (as described by Lyiscott et al., 2021), with a specific attention to the ways students are “restorying” and actively rewriting the texts they love to better match their own visions of their selves and worlds (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). In this paper, we contribute to a growing body of research on participatory cultures (Jenkins, 2012) and fandom literacies (Black, 2008; Chandler-Olcott, 2015; Jones & Storm, 2025; Magnifico et al, 2015) by describing a detailed case of youth authors drawing upon anime fandom practices in a narrative writing project in their English class. We do this by answering the following research questions:

1. How did Rene, Kiana, and Melissa describe their *MHA* fanfiction composing practices?
2. How did these fandom practices influence the superhero story these youth authors told?

Drawing from data we collected during the semester-long superhero storytelling project, we used frames from transmedial narrative analysis (Ryan, 2015; Schiller, 2018; Thon, 2017) to trace the influence of students’ fanfiction practices in their superhero storytelling. In our analysis, we identified three of these fan fictional composing practices: character

building (as opposed to plot creation), queer romantic combinations, and participatory storytelling. In short, students in this group spent time on a “deck” of characters rather than a linear story. This character deck allowed students to (re)couple their characters in queer ways, and it also left their story unfinished and open to audience participation and the group’s future texts.

Multiple times throughout the youths’ authoring, as Rene, Kiana, and Melissa perfected the drawings of their superhero characters, chose each character’s K-pop theme songs, and developed their individual back stories, Beth (who worked closely with this group) lamented that they “didn’t really have a story yet,” alluding to the group’s lack of a single plot for their story. While many teachers might consider Rene, Kiana, and Melissa’s work to be a failure of narrative writing, we suggest the character building the group conducted created possibilities for both a more queer and more participatory storyworld.

In this paper, we not only describe youth’s fan-fictional composing practices in this project, but we also argue that they shifted how we think about what constitutes a narrative broadly. We conclude by wondering how teachers can not only accept their students’ participation in fandoms but also use it to reshape their own understanding of acceptable reading and writing in their classrooms.

Literature Review: Fandoms

We ground our study of Rene, Kiana, and Melissa’s fandom-inspired composing practices in fandom scholarship from both media studies and new literacy studies. While media studies of fan fiction have largely attended to the finished product of fan fiction texts, (new) literacy studies of fanfiction have focused on legitimizing fandom practices and incorporating them into classrooms. We extend media studies of fandom by describing the *process* of fandom-inspired authoring, and we extend new literacy studies by not only legitimizing youths’ fandom practices in the project but also exploring how they should reshape the ways we teach narrative composing in schools.

Fandoms in Media Studies

First and foremost, this study built upon work conducted by Henry Jenkins (2012). In his explorations of fandom communities around texts that include *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Matrix*, Jenkins argued that literary studies and media studies need to pay attention to the grassroots textual production occurring in fandom communities. He illuminated ways the digital era has ushered in an age of what he termed “participatory culture,” in which culture, films, memes, theories, stories, games, merch, and alternate universes made by fans extend the boundaries of the original text of a story.

Within participatory culture, Jenkins and Deuze (2008) explained,

Every story, image, sound, brand, and relationship plays itself out across the widest possible array of media platforms, and the flow

of media content is shaped as much by decisions made in teenagers' bedrooms as it is by decisions made in corporate boardrooms. (p. 7)

Participatory culture both expands normative conceptions of who gets to author stories and broadens outlets for telling them, two elements that are evident in the storytelling work of this middle school group.

Fandom scholars have expanded on Jenkins' original work to focus specifically on the queer potential of the authoring that happens in fandoms. Within fan fictional texts, fans may both gender-bend characters (Busse & Lothian, 2017) and queer canonical relationships through what is called "slash" storytelling (Coppa, 2006), in which characters' queer romantic couplings are described through the shorthand of a slash (e.g., "Kirk/Spock" from *Star Trek*).

Thus, through participatory storytelling, fans may rewrite stories to better reflect their diverse identities or extend them in queer, reparative (Sedgwick, 2002) ways. In this paper, we similarly highlight the ways fandom's participatory culture potentiates queer storytelling. We looked particularly at the practices youth authors used to compose their queer storyworld, to better incorporate these practices into English classrooms and English education programs.

Fandoms in New Literacies Studies

We are also indebted to educational scholarship that has studied (and, therefore, legitimized) fan fiction as a legitimate literacy practice (Black, 2007, 2008, 2009; Chandler-Olcott, 2015; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003). In Black's studies of multilingual learners' participation in fandom communities, she suggested that educators begin seeing anime fan fiction particularly as a new literacy practice, where students can experiment within legitimate online communities of practice, to take on new identities and remix their existing cultural resources (Black, 2008).

These studies became a reference point for scholars who were making broader arguments about changing nature of literacy in the digital age (New London Group, 1996). Reading, writing, and meaning making were increasingly taking place across genres and platforms in digital communities where, in Ito et al.'s (2010) words, youth were "hanging out, messing around, and geeking out," experimenting with the texts they loved. This experimentation was not only encouraged in virtual spaces, but these spaces also inherently put fans in conversations with larger global communities. boyd's (2014) work on "connected" or "networked" learning used youths' participation in fan fiction websites as an example of a way youth both read and write or rewrite texts together online.

In our study, too, we similarly worked from this conceptualization of fan fiction as representing the promises of increasingly connected, democratic, and participatory literacy practices in the digital age. We recognize the work literacy scholars have done before us to document these fandom practices online (Curwood et al., 2013; Garcia & Haddix 2013; Lammers et al., 2017; Magnifico et al., 2015), in K-12 classroom spaces (Aleo et al., 2024; Jones & Storm, 2022, 2024, 2025; Wohlwend,

2009), and in English teacher education programs (Jones et al., 2021; Lammers et al., 2022;) Across this research, scholars have demonstrated how youth (and preservice teachers) may use these texts to reimagine their world and use their world to reimagine these texts, generating bidirectional critique.

Although literacy scholars have brought a revived focus to the role of fandoms in classrooms, there has been less attention on how these fan fictional texts might specifically be used to reframe reading/writing in teaching and teacher education. Instead, work in this area has been focused on legitimizing fan fiction authoring as a literacy practice. We build on these studies by demonstrating how Rene, Kiana, and Melissa's *MHA* fan fiction composing strategies not only constituted legitimate literacy practices but also reshaped what constituted narrative within the space of this project.

Theoretical Frame: Transmedial Narratology

To understand the shift Rene, Kiana, and Melissa made to traditional understandings of narrative, we employed theories of transmedial narratology. These scholars have explored what happens narratively when stories overflow the traditional boundaries of a single text, and they analyzed what happens when, for example, the universe of *Star Wars* moves beyond the initial films and is transported into books, video games, television shows, comics, merchandise, amusement park rides, and fan fiction texts. Transmedial narratologists, including Ryan (2015), Schiller (2018), and Thon (2017), have shifted our understanding of story from a linear event sequence to an entire world, inhabited by a specific set of characters. Because stories are now expansive, moving back and forth and across platforms, mediums, genres, and authors, Ryan (2015) suggested that "the term 'transmedia storytelling' is therefore a misnomer: the phenomenon should rather be called transmedia world-building" (p. 4).

While traditional understandings of narrative rely on beginning-middle-and-end plots, transmediality moves attention away from the events occurring and toward the characteristics of the world in which these events occur and the characters who populate this world. Schiller (2018) explained that narratives "manifest themselves less as singular plots and may seem to readers and viewers more like architecturally narrative universes, inhabited by multiple characters" (p. 102).

Because these are the items that remain most constant across transmedial narratives, characters take priority over the events occurring across distributed stories, which can sometimes be unrelated and even contradictory. In transmedial worlds, detailed characters who inhabit a certain set of relationships become transportable game pieces, which new authors can transport into new texts in shifting configurations. Ryan (2015) detailed this new attention to the people who make up the cast of a story:

While it is necessary to import characters to pitch a world, it is not enough to import a single character. One must import an entire cast, together with its social, technological, and natural environment. By importing a whole

cast, it becomes possible to expand the world by telling the story of minor characters. (p. 5)

By importing characters and the setting they occupy into new narrative spaces, the authors of transmedial narratives do not vertically add to the story's plot but rather horizontally expand possibilities of what happens in a particular storyworld. This was something we saw across Rene, Kiana, and Melissa's storytelling, as they built a deck of characters, whom they transported flexibly across events that changed and shifted in each of our storytelling sessions.

In their *MHA*-inspired superhero storytelling, their narrative aligned with Ryan's (2015) description of transmedial stories as "not serial... but a variety of autonomous stories or episodes, contained in various documents" (p. 4). The glue between these stories was not the plot or the sequence of events, but rather the cast of characters and the world in which they inhabited. Thus, transmedial narratology reframes how we understand narrative broadly, shaking up assumptions about how we bound and define narrative texts.

Methods

In this section, we begin by situating Rene, Kiana, and Melissa within the broader context of our superhero storytelling project. We describe our positionalities as facilitators within this project and authors of this article. Finally, we outline our ethnographic methods of data collection and the transmedial narrative analysis methods we used to make sense of this data.

Project Context

Rene, Kiana, and Melissa, three of 19 total seventh-grade youth authors we worked with in this project, came into this work full of enthusiasm for the task of reading and writing superhero stories. Already friends, these three were constantly together during the prewriting activities that we facilitated to spark students' storytelling. In this iteration, we met twice weekly during the students' 50-minute ELA period.

We began our semester by reading the Miles Morales version of the *Spiderman* comic together (Bendis & Pichelli, 2012) and inviting youth into discussions of what constitutes a superhero. To spark these discussions, we conducted several dramatic activities with youth, including a pedagogy called "Show Me," where students froze in stances that represented terms like "Superhero," "Powerful," and "Strong." When Pat, who was facilitating this activity, said the term "Mutant," Rene joked to Kiana, who was nearby:

Rene: Oh! I think I'm doing it already.

Kiana: Mutant? I normally look like that, let's go.

Rene: Me too!

Kiana: I'm an avocado, I'm a mutated avocado!

As Rene and Kiana's talk in this activity suggests, we purposefully arranged this project so that students could playfully step into superhero stories — both Miles Morales' and their own — to reimagine these texts and their worlds. Our project was pedagogically designed with critical sociocultural theories of imagination (Stetsenko, 2017) and play (Vygotsky, 1978) in mind, and we hoped that the genre of the superhero story (Fawaz, 2016), itself, might allow students to layer fantasy onto reality and, in doing so, construct new futures for their neighborhood, The Mount. Pat began this project when she was coteaching summer school with a Mountview teacher, and she noticed that, while students were uninterested in the curriculum she planned, they were interested in talking about Marvel and DC superheroes. This summer school experience snowballed into a yearly project that Pat conducted in collaboration with middle school English teachers at Mountview. Rene, Kiana, and Melissa participated in the third iteration of this storytelling project.

We began this semester by reading *Spiderman* for five 50-minute sessions and conducting dramatic brainstorming activities for one session before students split into self-groups to create superhero stories set in their neighborhood, the Mount. Using a deck of brainstorming “cards” that gave groups different superhero narrative elements to generate (e.g., safe place, superpower, origin story, and person to protect at all costs), youth authors told their stories for nine sessions and then spent seven sessions spread out in the Mountview library using different artist mediums (textiles, comic strips, short film, and dance) to present the stories they had told. In our final three sessions together, students presented their story to an audience of their family members, friends, and peers and reflected on the significance of their work.

During the semester of storytelling we analyze for this paper, students crafted tales about a breakdancing superhero named Bboy, a group of superhero queens who controlled the weather, and a superhero who turned into a fish whenever he desired. However, we chose to focus on Rene, Kiana, and Melissa's story in this paper because Beth worked with this group throughout the course of the semester as a participant and scribe. We have also chosen to analyze this group's work because their story was so heavily influenced by the anime series, *MHA*, and Rene, Kiana, and Melissa's preexisting shared experiences in the *MHA* fandoms.

Positionality

As facilitators of this project, we primarily acted as scribes for students' emerging narratives. This process was designed to encourage students' play with the texts they loved, and because groups were self-selected, students were often already bonded within shared affinity groups. Over the years, we worked with groups who used *Mortal Kombat*, *Space Jam*, *Fortnite*, *NBA 2K*, and *Steven Universe* as references and resources for their stories. As university-affiliated adults, in what we hoped would be youth-driven spaces, we recognized that we were often one step behind the world-building youth conducted with and through the fandoms they loved. We also recognized our necessary limitations when it comes to describing and reporting on youth authors' narrative work.

Rene, Kiana, and Melissa, who identified as Cambodian, Black, and Mexican, respectively, reported in their exit interviews that they, too, had bonded over shared interests. As Rene explained, when Beth asked how he became friends with Melissa, “I think she said K-Pop, and I was like, I’m interested.” Beth, a white, university-affiliated woman, regularly worked alongside this group as a participant and scribe and was often scrambling to catch up to their anime, K-pop (Korean pop music), and general pop cultural references. We wrote this piece, despite not being members of this fan fiction community, in the hope that future literacy practitioners might similarly consider fan fictional practices that they might not be familiar with as serious and even innovative, literacy work.

Data Collection

We used ethnographic methods (Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Heath & Street, 2008) of data collection because ethnography contextualizes language and stories within the social contexts of which they are a part. It not only allowed us to connect the group’s unique authoring practices to *MHA* fandom communities, but it also allowed us to see the social consequences of these authoring practices within the group’s emerging story world.

During this iteration of the project, we met twice weekly with participating youth authors during their 50-minute ELA period for 10 weeks, totaling 20 fifty-minute sessions. We collected audio recordings of each session, in addition to our ethnographic field notes and copies of student works during the project (we have 13 total hand-drawn and handwritten artifacts from Rene, Kiana, and Melissa’s group), and one copy of the youth authors’ final presentation. We also conducted two semistructured 50-minute interviews with youth storytelling groups at the midpoint and endpoint of the project to member-check our emerging findings and hear students’ interpretations of the stories they created. Beth conducted two interviews with Rene, Kiana, and Melissa, and their observations on their storytelling work are essential in connecting their fan fiction authoring to the story they told.

Data Analysis

To analyze this data set, we first constructed data logs or running records of the audio recordings of this group. We then conducted two stages of analysis to consider how fandom practices influenced the narrative Rene, Kiana, and Melissa constructed. In the first stage of analysis, we qualitatively coded (Miles et al., 2014) our interview data logs and the data logs of the group’s storytelling sessions for mentions of *MHA* fanfiction authoring practices (RQ1). In this stage of analysis, we noticed that the fandom practices students described fell into three primary patterns: character deck building, queer (re)couplings, and participatory storytelling. In the second stage of our analysis, we correlated these three patterns to specific elements in the story students told during their storytelling sessions and/or the final presentation they shared with their peers (RQ2). In this stage, we used transmedial narratology as an analytic frame to determine how exactly these fan fictional practices influenced the story these youth authors told.

Findings

We identified three key practices or characteristics of *MHA* fan fiction authoring that these youth used to tell their superhero story. We describe each of these three practices, character deck building, queer (re)coupling, and participatory authoring, in the three sections that follow. In these sections, we discuss the impact of these practices from a transmedia perspective, and we explore how *MHA* fan fiction practices shifted the way we view narrative in literacy instruction.

Character Deck Building

In our first midpoint interview, Beth asked the group what their favorite part of the project was so far. Rene exclaimed immediately, “Creating the characters!” He had a project iPad in front of him, and he was experimenting with a one-eyed version of his superhero character, Paradox. “There’s the cyclops version,” he explained, as he showed Beth his work. “The hair sucks. I don’t know why I made his pupil a heart. I think the hair is good!” Beth responded then asked why Rene liked creating characters. “You get to choose how this person acts, what they do. It gives you a sense of power because you have control over the situation and stuff.” As he explained this, Rene continued to tweak the image of his character, creating the image which is pictured in Figure 2.

This enthusiasm for character creation echoed the ways the group talked about their fan fiction a few minutes further into the interview. It was when the group looked at Rene’s phone and started giggling that Beth learned that Rene and Melissa all authored and published fan fiction. “Some of hers have her own characters,” Rene explained about Melissa’s fan fiction, “and I have, like, twelve characters.” When asked about his characters, he replied,

All my characters are basically just different personas of me, minus the powers. Like, let’s see, Gabriel is the chill, nice dude, casual, chill, a bit emo. Let’s see, my other character, Shiro, is the more bubbly side, and then there’s Aikido, who’s straight depression, not going to talk about that. And Paradox is the more brave part, I suppose.

Fan fiction writers have long written themselves into the stories they love, creating stand-ins for themselves that fan fiction readers and scholars call “Mary Sues” or “Murray Stus.” These characters serve as proxies for the authors as they write themselves into new worlds. In his description of character creation, Rene expanded this concept, explaining how his whole deck of character represent “different personas of me.”

Figure 2
Sample From the Final Presentation



Rene then enviously mentioned a friend who “has like 200 characters.” How does she keep track of them?” Beth asked, and Rene said, “If you have a lot of OCs, you write them down in a Google Doc. Then you can do whatever you want with them.” When Beth asked about the term “OC,” Rene and Melissa explained that it meant “original character.” “OC is related to art, though,” Rene explained, “and RP is role play.” He proceeded to pull up OC art from his phone and a RP text chain where he roleplayed the character of Seb (from *MHA*), texting a friend as this character rather than as himself.

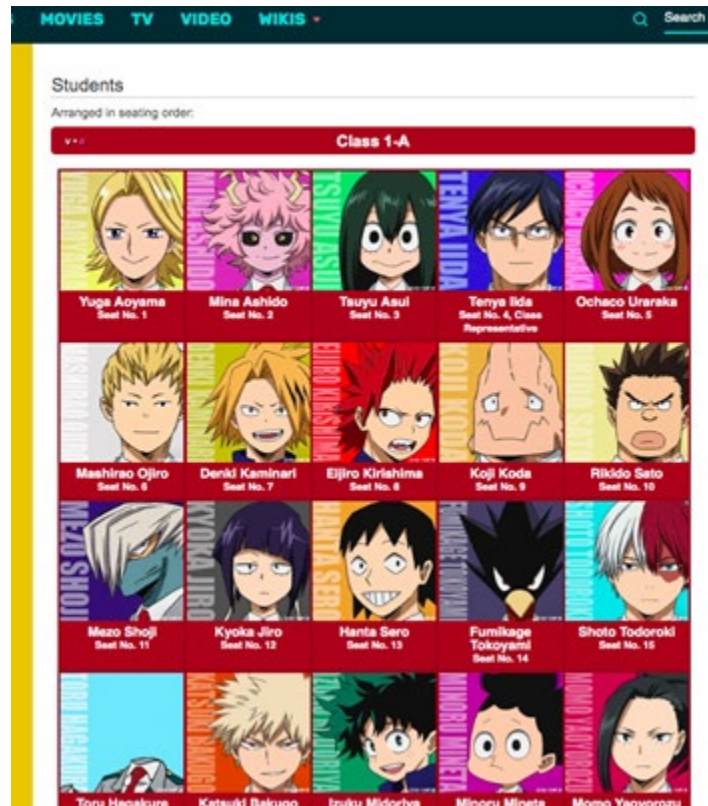
In this interview, Rene and Melissa underscored the importance of character design in storytelling broadly and fan fiction, specifically, talking about their characters in a way that made both the storytelling in this project and telling of fan fiction seem oriented to developing art and personalities for OCs. They described in detail what Kiana identified in the conversation included in the introduction to this paper. In response to Beth’s question, “Why is anime so popular right now?” Kiana said simply, “The characters, the art.” The characters and the art were at the center of Rene, Kiana, and Melissa’s descriptions of their fan fictional storytelling practices, and also their descriptions of the work they completed in this project.

Although visualizing and building characters may seem like a traditional part of narrative writing in school, Rene, Kiana, and Melissa’s character building consumed almost the entirety of their work together. In late May, other groups had drafts of their complete superhero narratives and were transforming their drafts into scripts, songs, dances, and movies for their final presentation. Rene, Kiana, and Melissa were still furiously working on drawing digital drafts of each of their superhero characters. We have acted as scribes for youth’s superhero stories across three iterations of this project, and we are used to asking the question “What happens next?” to propel participants’ narrative work. However, this group was not driven by narrative action, but rather by building a collection of characters who all had associated images, personality traits, background stories, archetypes, and tendencies.

We see nods to this deck building in the students’ final presentation (see Figure 2 for samples of those slides). When we realized that this group had only characters and no plot, we worked with Rene, Kiana, and Melissa to tell a short story in one session at the very end of the semester. However, this short episode — a tale of the superhero team rescuing their friends from Melissa’s villain character — does not appear in the slides the group created to tell their story. Instead, the slides include an anime-style picture of each of the six characters, with defining traits, an introduction to the deck of characters the youth authors spent the semester creating.

When we noticed that one trouble-making character’s bio explained that he was the “Mineta of this world,” (Bboy in Figure 2), we discovered Mineta was a rabble-rouser from the *MHA* universe. In our online explorations of *MHA*, we found that many fan-created websites similarly began with information about the extensive cast of characters that are transmedially set in motion across *MHA* anime, manga, and fan fiction (see Figure 3 for a depiction of a *MHA* character chart, including Mineta.)

Figure 3
MHA Characters



Some outside observers may have watched this group tell their superhero story and determined that they never generated a finished (conflict-climax-resolution) narrative and, therefore, did not adequately complete the task assigned. Indeed, much of this group's storytelling consisted of determining which "class" (mages, humans, or beasts) each character would slot into and selecting the color of clothes that each character should be wearing in their final image. In their exit interview, Beth asked the group to describe in their own words what happened in their story. Rene commented, "I guess you could just say everyone was just fitting into their roles, I guess." Much of the storytelling time this group spent was used in determining not a sequence of events but rather a role each character would fill.

However, a transmedial lens on this group's storytelling reveals this character creation not as digressive from narrative work but rather key to how stories are transmedially told. Transmedial narratologists identify character creation as an essential first step toward creating worlds that can transmedially move across modes and media in texts written by a variety of authors. Ryan (2015) noted that once a "cast of characters" is created, these characters can be playfully imported into new and flexible circumstances by a wide array of textual creators and consumers. Because narratives are increasingly transmedial and rarely ever contained within a

single text, “=when we consider narrative in the digital age, we should not expect a single coherent narrative arc, but rather a cast of characters as a throughline.

Therefore, while this group’s work might be read as a failure to develop a traditional narrative, the group was actually operating on a metalevel, building a cast of characters that could be dropped into a variety of situations in different, flexible permutations. Rene, Melissa, and Kiana’s description of their fan-fiction authoring practice suggests that this character-building was a narrative technique that they imported from this space.

Queer Character Combinations

Creating a deck of characters rather than a stable plot allows characters to be creatively combined and recombined in a variety of different situations. A second element of Rene, Kiana, and Melissa’s storytelling, that mirrored *MHA* fanfiction practices, was the queer love story the group built for Paradox’s character. The deck of characters this group created in their superhero storytelling facilitated the “shipping” or romantic recombining that scholars of queer fan fiction (Busse & Lothian, 2017; Coppa, 2006) have described as an important part of the fan fiction genre. Shipping involves putting two (or more) characters into a romantic relationship, usually characters who are not in a romantic relationship in canonical versions of a text.

Beth learned about this fandom practice in exit interviews when she asked about Rene and Melissa’s fan fiction writing on *Wattpad*. In response, Rene explained for the first time directly that he was writing a fan fiction of the show, *My Hero Academia*:

Beth: What is it a fan fiction of?

Rene: It’s just like shipping two people together

Beth: Who? Real people?

Rene: No, from an anime, from *Boku No Hiro Akademia*, in English, that’s *My Hero Academy*. And so their names are Bakugou, Todoroki, and Deku, yes, that’s three people.

Beth: So you made a three-person relationship?

Rene: Yes. Well actually, it’s a triangle for now. Deku doesn’t know who he loves. Yet.

By building a fantasy three-person love triangle between these three boy characters in the *MHA* anime series, and by teasing that Deku, the protagonist of the series, doesn’t know who he loves, “yet,” Rene illustrated the queer potential of fan fiction broadly and his fan fiction, specifically. Even in this short description of his fan fiction, Rene keeps multiple queer options open for Deku (a canonically straight character), ready to oscillate between two possible queer pathways for Deku’s romantic coupling, where he might be shipped with either Bakugou or Todoroki, two relationships that are not part of the canonical text of this show.

Within their superhero storytelling, this group conducted the queer shipping that characterized Rene’s *MHA* fan fiction, which he wrote outside of school. In this same interview, Melissa and Rene taught Beth

the term “Boys Love,” which specifically describes anime that has queer-coded relationships between boy characters. (For example, *Yuri! On Ice*, the ice skater anime that the students discuss in the introduction anecdote, is considered a “Boys Love” show.) When asking whether Paradox fit into this category, Beth accidentally suggested that he was in a relationship with his brother, Max. Rene, scandalized, corrected her vehemently, “THEY are brothers! Paradox and ALEX!”

Although this relationship stayed constant within the story, Nina, the villain, had a crush on Alex too, and while she threatened this relationship, Rene decided that Paradox had the power to defeat her and defend his love for Alex. As he stated during one of the storytelling sessions, “Nina’s going to kidnap Paradox’s boyfriend because she’s a jealous person. And she’s going to kill one of them. I hope she kills Paradox because he can come back at any time he wants.”

Nina’s desire for Alex fueled early conversations about Paradox and Nina’s characters, and Rene initially built the same type of flexible love triangle that fueled his *MHA* fan fiction. As transmedial narratologists describe, this group constructed, not a linear set of events, but rather a cast of characters who were enmeshed in specific social relationships. However, throughout the storytelling, even these relationships remained in flux. At one point, Rene mused, “I am going to be a Satan right now and turn Alex into a villain.” When Beth responded, “I think that would be good,” Rene shifted the core relationship of the story: “Paradox and Alex *used* to be together...” While this shift did not make it into the final text of the group’s presentation, and Paradox’s slide lists “Alex” under things Paradox likes (Figure 2), this romantic fluidity mirrors the permutational and in-flux “shipping” that Rene described in his fan fiction.

The fact that this character deck could be combined and recombined in creative ways allowed the authors to play with their characters’ sexualities and relationships in malleable ways (for example, Alex might have dated Nina if Nina were successful). This was true with straight character relationships, too. At one point, Melissa was asked if a comedic trouble-making character, Bboy, could date her character, Nina, and Melissa responded with an emphatic “no.”

All the characters this group created were open to new romantic couplings and recombinations. However, we are particularly excited about the queer possibilities that fan fictional authoring practices opened for these youth authors, because during our storytelling, Rene and Kiana also described their own sexualities in shifting and flexible ways, playing with labels and terminology. In contrast to a linear narrative which often concludes by closing down relational possibilities, in this group’s storytelling, the relational possibilities between characters’ remained open and available to change.

Participatory Storytelling

The third element of Rene, Kiana, and Melissa’s authoring that was linked to their *MHA* fanfiction practices was the participatory nature of their storytelling. In creating a character deck, Rene, Kiana, and Melissa not only made space for multiple future ways they might continue writing

about these characters, but they also created a universe that was available to reader participation and recreation.

The participatory nature of the group's fanfiction practices became apparent in the midsemester interview, when Rene explained the logistics of posting their fanfiction to the online platform *Wattpad*. *Wattpad* is one of several popular sites where fan authors can post their fan fiction, and it has been celebrated by scholars as a place where youth may step into and rewrite the stories they care about (Coleman & Hall, 2019). When Beth asked how many people had read their posted *Wattpad* stories, Rene replied that while he had "1.16k" views on his posted fan fiction, Melissa had "3 something k." When asked whether they would share their *Wattpad* work with her, Rene responded, "Discover it for yourself!"

In these initial conversations about their out-of-school fan fiction practices, Rene, Kiana, and Melissa described producing texts that stretched across multiple media, which included the digital art they drew for the original characters, the Google Docs shareable online documents they made to keep track of what they created, and the text conversations they had role-playing their characters. They also described putting their texts in conversation with larger digital communities in the tracking of their *Wattpad* views. Rene's insistence that Beth had to "discover it for yourself" demonstrates the interactive and bottom-up participatory nature of the communities of which they were a part. As Rene explained, access to Rene and Melissa's fan fiction required Beth's active participation within these fandom communities.

The participatory nature of the fandom communities Rene, Kiana, and Melissa were members of was reflected in the group's final presentation of their work. Their slide show began with large text that read "Hello. Are you...listening?" (Figure 4). In this second-person question, this group's slides began by grammatically looping the audience into their presentation. The next slide presumed an audience response to this question, preconstructing their participation: "Good, good, just wanted to make sure." It is only after this presentation ensures that the imagined audience is listening that the narrator continues: "Alright, are you ready? This is the story of loss. Of power. Of a million more sad words. Shall we begin?"

As Rene read this narration during the final presentations, he paused for the imagined consent of his listeners, demanding their participation and readiness before introducing the group's cast of characters. In contrast to other groups who performed their story and took a seat, this group dissolved boundaries between listener and participant by authoring their audience's participation into their text.

After this introduction, there were several slides describing the characters (see Figure 2). Then this presentation concluded with a series of final slides that asked, "Now. Will you join us? The choice is..." In contrast to the initial slides, however, Rene designed these slides so that there was an apparent glitching over those words. After a few slides of "glitching" (created by Rene with shapes on the Google Slides, on online slide presentation app), the text read, "Don't bother. Your choices don't matter. See ya." (see Figure 5 for images of these slides.)

Figure 4
Intro Slides

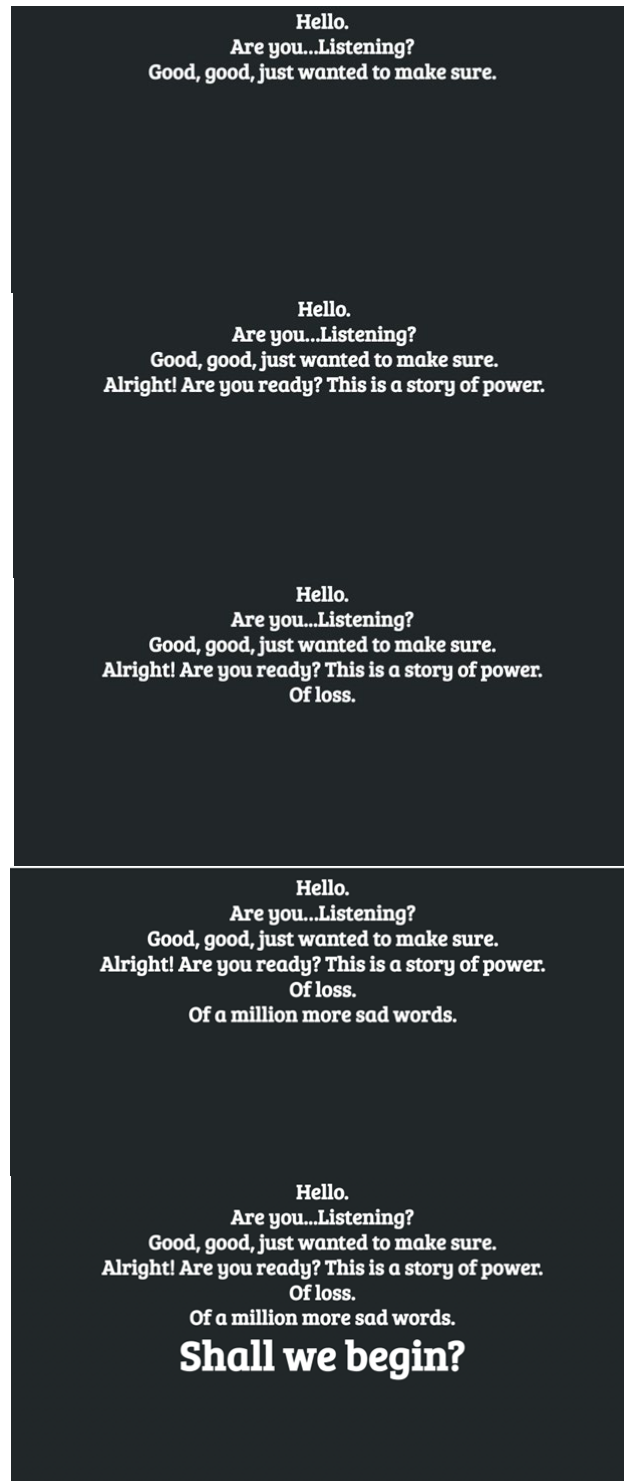


Figure 5
Closing Slides

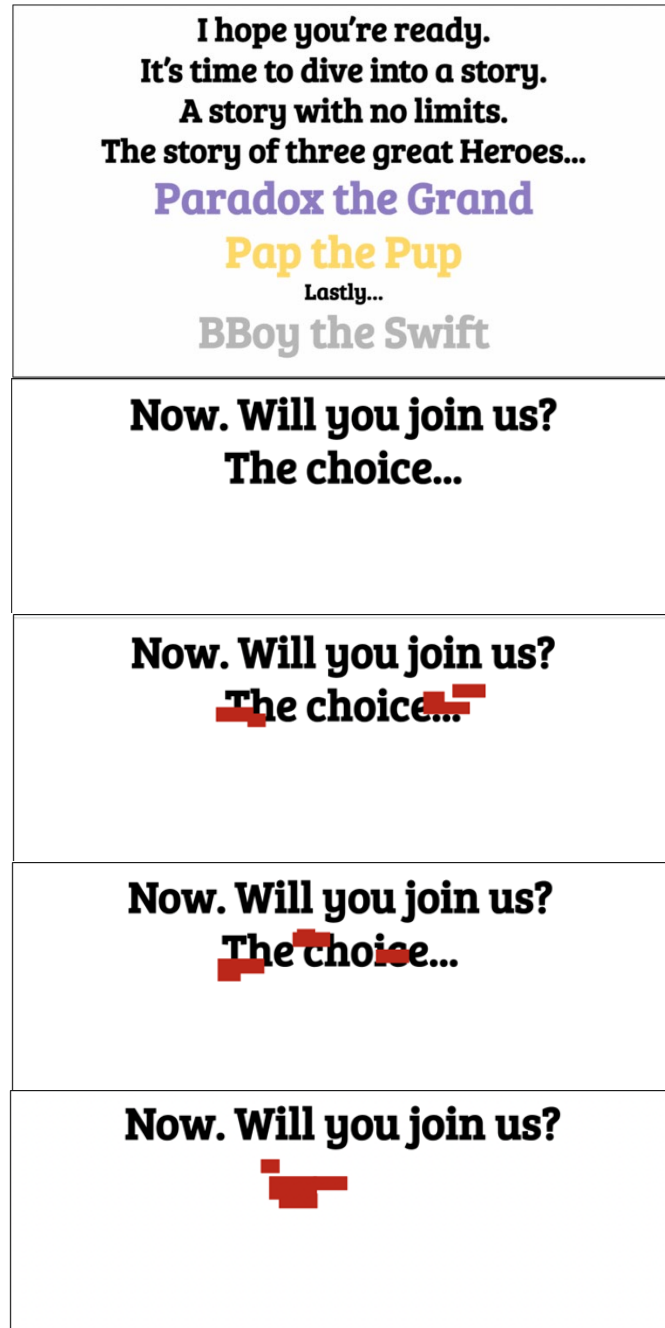


Figure 5 continued
Closing Slides

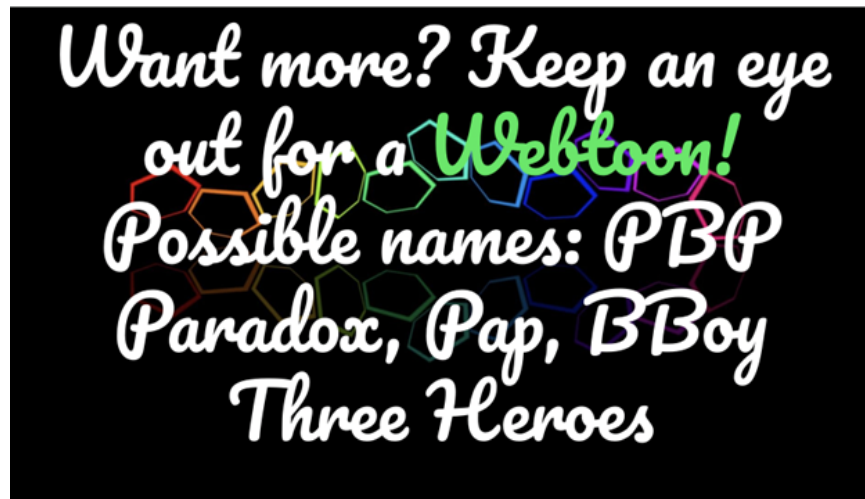


The ending slides underscored the inevitability of the audience's participatory position. Although a listener might expect "the choice is yours" to appear on the screen, the choice of whether to "dive into a story" with these heroes on their (as yet, unwritten) journeys is, in fact, not ours.

“Your choices don’t matter,” the slides tell us. Thus, Rene, in constructing these slides, included the audience as not only listeners/readers but participants, who before they knew it, were alongside these characters in the world Rene, Kiana, and Melissa created. Production and consumption converged in these authors’ presentation of their story, as participants were asked to step into the limitless storyworld.

In addition to positioning audience members as participants in the narrative they presented, Rene, Kiana, and Melissa also suggested that they might continue this story on digital platforms. While they used practices they established on *Wattpad* to construct this set of slides, they ended this presentation with a slide that encouraged the audience to “Keep their eye out for a *Webtoon*.” This statement referenced another digital platform, where fan fiction authors can publish their own comics, which readers can scroll through (see Figure 6 for this slide). When Beth asked Rene to summarize his story in an exit interview, he commented, “Paradox kills everyone except his little brother in a house fire.”

Figure 6
Final slide.



As a scribe and participant in the group’s storytelling, Beth had not heard this part of Paradox’s background. Rene explained, “I was going to put that in the slides, but I was like, hold on, you can’t do that, delete everything. If I actually do that, I am going to tell it in the Webtoon, no spoilers.” Even after the telling of the group’s superhero story was complete, Rene encouraged not only Beth but anyone hearing this final interview to continue to participate in the group’s unfolding narrative universe.

Thus, this deck of characters was the starting point of a transmedial story that could be (and, Rene implied, should be) expanded across platforms in their future authoring. There was no single author of this world, and even the listening audience was looped in as active textual participants. And, as the slides suggest, there was also no clear end point. This storyworld was unfinished and open to new and unfolding variations and events. This

multiplatform, multigenre storytelling decentered singular, authoritative plotlines and encouraged wide participation and publication, opening varied authoring possibilities.

Discussion

In our analysis of Rene, Kiana, and Melissa's fan fictional storytelling, we found that they employed three practices from their experiences authoring *MHA* fan fiction. First, instead of authoring a single plot-dominant storyline, they used the time and space of this project to flesh out a deck of characters that mirrored those they used in their out-of-school fan fiction composing. This deck of characters facilitated a second practice from fan fiction authoring, the queer recombination of characters into new romantic couplings. Finally, they constructed a storyworld that was open to participatory storytelling. The group's final presentation not only suggested that they might continue building the adventures of these characters, but it also invited the audience into the world as active participants and creators.

These findings contribute to media studies of fan fiction by highlighting the processes by which (youth) fan fiction authors construct these texts and broadly employ fan fiction composing practices. Scholars of participatory culture have analyzed fan fiction texts to demonstrate how authoring is distributed and therefore democratized (Jenkins, 2012). And scholars of queer fan fiction have analyzed fan fiction texts to demonstrate their potential for creating unexpected couplings and queering straight narratives (Busse & Lothian, 2017; Coppa, 2003). This study contributes to this work by describing the specific practices youth authors used to accomplish these ends. By tracing fan fiction authoring practices, this study illustrates that character deck-building makes texts more available to more participatory interaction and flexibly queer couplings, two elements of fan fiction texts that media studies scholars have studied and celebrated. Naming these fan fiction composing practices helps teachers and teacher educators move them into their reading and writing curriculum for more equitable and participatory literacy experiences.

These findings also contribute to new literacy studies of fan fiction by not only legitimizing fan fiction writing as a composing practice but by demonstrating how exactly it challenges existing conceptualizations of what constitutes narrative. Working from theories of transmedial narratology, which see stories as spread across a variety of texts, genres, and media, this study demonstrates how these youth authors worked with a transmedial orientation toward narrative creation. Instead of developing a "singular plot" (Schiller, 2018, p. 102), this group authored a deck full of developed characters that were ready to be inserted into texts across future modes and media. In a sense, these fan fiction authors composed the flexible building blocks—characters and relationships—that they worked from when role-playing or writing *MHA* fan fiction in out-of-school spaces.

Culturally relevant teacher education (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014) demands an attention to the way youth are currently reading and telling stories in their everyday, outside of school lives. This paper builds on existing research that suggests the increasing prevalence

of youth membership in fandom communities around the texts they love (Black, 2008; Chandler-Olcott, 2015; Jones & Storm, 2025; Magnifico et al, 2015). However, this study also suggests that fan fiction composing practices — with their attention to character over narrative plot — in fact, challenge what we consider to be “good” reading and writing in school.

Some might consider this group’s failure to tell a beginning-middle-and-end story a consequence of youth spending too much time online scrolling between texts on platforms like TikTok and YouTube. A transmedial narratology lens flips this script, demanding we see youth not as digressing from but rather innovating upon traditional narrative forms.

As narratives increasingly become spread across multiple platforms and “media content is shaped as much by decisions made in teenagers’ bedrooms as it is by decisions made in corporate boardrooms” (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008, p. 7), Rene, Kiana, and Melissa created a set of characters that were malleably available to be transmedially used and reused. Not only did they play with these characters during their storytelling, but they also invited the audience to participate in future authoring on digital platforms like Webtoons. In contrast to paradigms that prioritize single stories and authorial control, Rene, Kiana, and Melissa took authoring practices from their transmedial *MHA* fandom community and used them to construct a broad, flexible storyworld, where they could more freely reimagine possibilities for their characters and for themselves.

Conclusion

Beth, in her supervision of student teachers, was recently in a 10th-grade English class where, during the 15 minutes of independent reading at the beginning of class, almost every student pulled out a manga text. Students read from *Naruto*, *Bleach*, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, and *One Piece*, turning pages backward as they consumed these stories. As anime fandom continues to grow in popularity, we argue in this paper that through anime fandom composing practices, Rene, Kiana, and Melissa bypassed the linear, teleologic, monotextual narratives that often characterize fiction writing in ELA spaces to create a multimodal, multilayered, and participatory universe that reflected their own interests and identities. By transposing *MHA* fan fictional authoring into their superhero storytelling, this group created a storyworld that opened multiple pathways for both participation and authorship. This paper concludes by wondering what an emphasis on character and world-building (and a deemphasis on self-contained plotlines) means for how educators read and write with youth in school.

To investigate this, we also call for more research that explores what anime fandoms and fandoms broadly have to offer to K-12 classrooms. We again recognize our limitations as nonmembers of the anime and manga fandoms, and we particularly hope that teachers and teacher educators who are members of these (and other) fandom communities may contribute to this work. We recommend that teacher education programs frame teachers not as transmitters of dominant cultural ways of reading and writing but rather as ethnographers, who in response to the students’ authoring within affinity spaces, can shift the way narrative in literacy instruction is broadly defined. Such a change might move fan fiction from

working as a mechanism for restorying canonical textual content to a means for challenging how and why educators read and write with youth.

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