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SUPER FANDOM

How Our Obsessions Are Changing What We Buy and Who We Are

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PREFACE

October 29, 2012, New York City

The Weather Channel had warned us a hurricane was coming, but we weren't too worried about it. Irene had passed through the year before with barely a downed tree, and anyway it was too late to change our plans.

Two nights before Halloween, the staff of Squishable.com, Inc. was getting ready for a party. A virtual Halloween party. Twice before, our fans had surprised us by throwing secret parties on our Facebook page, flooding our timeline with hand-drawn pictures and photos of themselves and their stuffed animals decked out in party regalia, baking cookies, playing games, and generally having a good time. This time we were hosting the party ourselves. The invites had been posted days earlier on numerous social-media platforms, and hundreds of Squishable fans around the globe had already RSVP'd to say that they would (virtually) be there.

New York had preemptively declared a state of emergency, shutting down the subways, so our team was working from various locations around the city. On Facebook, a superfan like Dani would

post, "We're watching the weather channel, worrying about all our friends on the coast. Please stay safe!!! On a different subject—will the Halloween party be postponed?" For days, we'd been looking at each other and whispering, "What should we say?" Even with only hours to go, every so often one of us would chime in on our internal chat client with some version of "So . . . maybe this isn't the night for this?" and we'd all Google the weather yet again.*

We didn't want to disappoint anyone, and anyway preparations had already taken up three prime workdays when we should have been designing new products or approving fur samples. None of us had the traditional business background that might have warned about the dangers of the sunk-cost fallacy. The storm's name hardly sounded threatening. Sandy? Really?

Squishable is a technology company with a toy habit, so the internal joke goes. We create stuffed animals. Big ones, little ones, quirky stuffed animals. As a rule the entire team has always been made up of refugees from other industries—software design, law, finance, government, media—and early on it allowed us to bypass a lot of pitfalls. Most toy companies sold largely wholesale; we sold more than half our stock directly off our website. Most toy companies released six to twelve new items per line a year; we released hundreds. Most toy companies targeted kids; we had plenty of kid fans, but our most active audience was teens and young adults. Most toy companies used a design team to come up with new ideas; we used our fans—their concepts, their design input, and, eventually, their drawings. We may have been the first company to ever release a plush Shrimp, Cthulhu, Grim Reaper, and Slice of Toast.

Earlier that year, we'd decided to try a Kickstarter campaign

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* Please note that here and throughout the book we reproduce all social-media posts in their original, unedited form.

for a Squishable Shiba Inu, a design we hadn't originally planned to make. It had come in second in a contest to determine the next dog breed to be prototyped, ranking just behind the Corgi (which had gone on to become a bestseller.) The Kickstarter launched with the concept art: a red dog with circular eye patches. The answer had been a resounding yes, yes, yes: the fans loved our red Shiba design concept and would gladly wait for the product to be manufactured, shipped, and released.

In early October, the Kickstarter was long over. The prototype pictures had just been posted when we received an unexpected fan comment: now that she saw the actual photo, she thought it should be colored gold, with different eye patches. Suddenly, angry comments filled our Kickstarter, Facebook, and inbox. We had ruined the design. We were evil. We had betrayed them. They were reporting us to Kickstarter. They would never buy another Squishable again.

We felt terrible. How had it all gone so wrong? I bit my fingernails bloody every night agonizing over what to do. We wanted to stay on the fans' good side, but we hadn't budgeted for a second variation. There were tears. Had we torpedoed the whole company by trying something innovative? Ahhh . . .

By late October, the office was tense. It was the right time for a feel-good event, a way to remind everyone that we were bigger than the color of a Shiba Inu. We wouldn't get a chance like this for another year. In fact, once the holiday rush started in another couple of weeks, it would be all we could do to update social media at all. And besides, we really liked our fans.

At the time, there were only three of us on the creative team to run the party: designers Melissa and Kendra, and myself. Scott, our office manager, was prepping the content and materials. Everyone in the company planned to make at least one virtual appearance—even Charles, our general counsel, would join in.

Because everyone else lived in Brooklyn or Queens, the photography props had been dragged from our Union Square office over to the thirteenth-floor one-bedroom Aaron and I shared by the East River in Manhattan, just barely outside the mandatory evacuation zone. We knew there might be a power outage, so we had brought over half a dozen fully charged laptops. Between a Verizon Fios line, two different cell phone hot spots, and, if all else failed, a battered old Sprint cell modem from 2010, which we'd forgotten to cancel, there were plenty of paths to the Internet in case of emergency.

The fans had been posting their defiance for hours:

"Dear Sandy: do NOT knock out mine or anyone else's power! We have a very squishy holiday party to attend! If you do, you will have to answer to MY wrath!! WRATH!! HELL HATH NO FURY LIKE A SQUISHER SCORNED!!!" wrote Mel.

"I am prepared for Frankenstorm. If we need to evacuate, I am demanding everyone take one full size squishable and one mini. The micros we be hanging on my mom's bag. COME AT MEH BRO!" wrote Samantha.

"Be safe during Frankenstorm everyone! . . . Hopefully your house/apartment won't flood and your Squishables won't get wet!" posted Oceanus, the mini Squishable Narwhal, presumably by way of its owner.

With two hours to go, superfan Sara posted, "Is everyone ready for the Halloween Party?!?!?!?!? I can't wait!! I have costumes ready for some of my squishy friends and I have to make some refreshments when I get home from work today. We carved pumpkins last night so I have to roast the seeds, make pumpkin muffins, popcorn and hot cocoa! I also have some candy and caramel apples too! So excited for a fun and delicious night!!"

Canceling was not an option. We were Squishable! We could weather a stinking superhurricane!

As the wind began to blow like it really meant it, Aaron and I ventured outdoors one more time, passing boarded-up windows and piles of sandbags by the subway entrances. We tried, and failed, to pick up extra batteries for the flashlights, and succeeded in buying the very last available bag of dog food for Oyster, our Yorkie-poodle puppy. Then we went home, filled the bathtub and sinks with water, opened some beers, and waited for seven p.m.

"I'm out—stay safe and dry guys!" wrote Beth, head of the customer-service team, from her home out in Michigan.

As 7:00 hit the Eastern seaboard, pictures started flowing into the Facebook page from early arrivals. "ok! here we go!" typed Melissa into our internal chat client. We posted our welcome to Facebook, and hundreds of fans wrote back variations of:

"WHOOOOO PARTY PARTY!!!"

"Party Time HERE!!!!!!!!!!!! Hoo WAH!!!!!!!"

"Beware! It is a guest arriving in the middle of gale force winds."

"YAYYY! PARTY! :D ME AND MY 13 SQUISHIES ARE HERE!"

"TRICK OR SQUISH!!!!"

. . . and flooded the page with pictures of stuffed animals decked out like ghosts and pirates.

It started to rain at seven-thirty p.m. as we posted the rules for the limerick contest. At 7:45 it *really* started to rain as we posted the first photo of Squishables partying. From Sunset Park in south Brooklyn, Melissa posted a video of Michael Jackson's "Thriller." To the east, in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Kendra posted black-and-white line art for fans to color. Melissa posted a call for drawing ideas. I put up photos of a Squishable Narwhal in a bowl of candy corn and a Squishable Horse bobbing for apples. We used personal Facebook accounts so the fans would know it was really us, and our posts mixed with hundreds of pictures from across the country: Squish-

able Gryphons dressed as Harry Potter characters, axolotls dressed like Sailor Moon, a bride-and-groom cow and bull, and a raccoon TV announcer.

"Can somebody draw me a narwhal?"

"I am making Zoe & Cthulhu cookies!!!!"

"Do any of you people know how difficult it is to come up costumes for 96 squishables?!"

"There was once a Squish from Nantucket . . ."

"This FB party is totally cheering me up :)"

The windows on the thirteenth floor were rattling in their frames. Down below, a family coming home from a hurricane party was tackled to the ground by a bunch of quick-thinking college kids just before mom, dad, and baby stepped into a wind tunnel between two buildings. They were all right, but their dog had to be reeled in from the flow by his leash.

We stuck to the timeline, tensely submitting each post on schedule. Costume contest at 8:00. Coloring-book page at 8:15. Photo of pumpkin decorating at 8:20. Melissa became overwhelmed by fan drawing requests and Kendra took over. Cell coverage turned spotty, and none of the drawings were posting from phones as planned.

"hahaha omg none of them are coming through. Omg. and there are more requests haha. halp," wrote Melissa.*

"We laugh because otherwise we'd cry," wrote Kendra. "I am gonna have grey hair by the end of tonight."

During a lull, we opened one of the backup computers and brought up Twitter and CNN. Battery Park City to the south was underwater. Avenue C a couple blocks to the east was underwater. Hoboken was underwater. The subways were underwater. Through

* Using the unedited text of social-media posts in this books saves us from correcting our own transcribed spelling and grammar mistakes too.

the windows, we could see the East River, a whole lot closer than it was before. We found out later that even as we typed, the massive NYU Langone Medical Center ten blocks north had lost its backup generators, its staff scrambling to evacuate patients and babies down its darkened stairwells.

"how are you guys fairing the hurricaine!?!? hope you're okay!" posted fan Rachel.

We forwarded updates of pending power outages to each other. "#ConEd has begun the process of shutting off electrical service to a part of Brooklyn, to protect both company and customer equipment," we warned our Brooklynites. In return, they posted photos from Twitter showing cars floating by, blocks from our apartment.

"Zoe, no offense, this FB party is a beautiful and terrible thing, and our reach is going to explode, but let's never ever ever do this again," Melissa wrote.

"I'm okay for now, just getting a little freaked!" wrote Kendra as the lights blinked on and off like mad.

"You don't have to stay on if you don't want—this is NOT your top priority."

"It's cool!" insisted Kendra. She later admitted she had been typing while huddled on the floor of her hallway, the only place in her apartment without windows, listening to the wind as it tore chunks of metal from her roof.

We posted and posted and posted, and the windows shook and the wind hoooowled, and the streets below turned into rivers. When we looked outside, the buildings around us had become dark, hulking islands rising up from the wet, with rain streaming down their sides. Could that possibly be *water,* pouring through below the FDR Drive? Oyster did not get his evening walk that night. I couldn't have pried him out from under the bed anyway.

At around eight-thirty p.m., just after we posted a picture of a

jellyfish trick-or-treating, there was a huge flash of light and a boom from the southeast, and seconds later the lights flickered out for the final time. We would later learn that the big Con Ed transformer over on 14th Street had exploded and plunged the southern half of Manhattan into blackness. Outside the rain poured on and on and on.

We broke out the backup laptops and tried the Internet. It was down. We tried the cell phones. They were down. We tried the old Sprint cell modem. It was working—there was just enough bandwidth to send a final SOS across the river to Brooklyn, where we could still see the lights glowing faintly through the storm. *Tell Facebook we're offline but not to worry, tell them to keep partying without us*. Then those bars too went to zero.

So we sat in the dark and drank beers from the slowly warming fridge and laughed at how weird our lives had become.

The next morning we carried Oyster down thirteen flights of pitch-black stairs to survey the wreckage outside our door. The cars on 20th Street had floated inland and washed up everywhere, scattered across the sidewalk like LEGOs. Each was choked with debris up to the steering wheel. A huge railroad tie had been ripped out of the seawall and hurled on top of a Ford Mustang. The streets were clogged with dirt and sand and broken glass, with streams of brackish river water still cutting channels through the mess as it poured off the island. The bottom floor of the building next door had been torn apart, its crumpled door wedged half open in a deep pool of water like the remains of some kind of swampy apocalypse.

What seemed like the entire population of the East Village was standing on the beleaguered banks of the river, bundled in sweatshirts and blankets against the cold, their arms outstretched over their heads, cell phones held high in the wind to attract a signal off the distant towers in Brooklyn.

The first to contact us was Charles—he'd found working

Wi-Fi somewhere underneath the Brooklyn Bridge where he was sharing space with a dozen bedraggled financiers. Slowly, one by one, the Squishable staff checked in by text and email and chat to say they were damp but safe.

Scott volunteered to cover "the socials" and tell the world we were still here. He checked back in a few minutes later to say that after we had disappeared, a couple of superfans had taken over the party to answer questions about the costume contest, post music, draw pictures, and keep it going until long after midnight. At one point, they had sponsored a countrywide game of "Two Truths and a Lie."

"So happy to hear that everyone in NY is safe and squishy!" fan Cat had posted immediately. It was a perfect moment. Even spread across the city as we were, we all got a little choked up about it.

"That was a very high-octane social media thing we just did," commented Melissa.

As we prepared for the hike uptown, with its promise of working outlets, warm hotel rooms, and steaming, life-giving bowls of noodle soup, my phone chimed one more time. I checked my email. It was a superfan. She wanted to let us know that she was really really really pissed about the color of the Shiba Inu.

Zoe Fraade-Blanar

SUPER FANDOM

INTRODUCTION

WELCOME TO THE FANDOM SINGULARITY

"I Never Tho't I Would Do That!"

In the summer of 1896, Alice Drake left her home in Colorado and boarded a transatlantic liner for Europe. She was young, moneyed, and attractive enough to provoke the occasional ribald comment from the locals. She was also a serviceable pianist.

The Grand Tour was a rite of passage for many an upper-class American during the nineteenth century. Young aristocrats (and their entourage of cooks, servants, tutors, and hangers-on) would travel a careful itinerary of European historical and cultural sites, journeying for months, or sometimes years. In many countries the tradition endures to this day as the "gap year," the "year abroad," or, in some cases, "She's still backpacking around Europe without a job? It's been, like, a year!"

Most parents steered their progeny toward the museums of the Netherlands and the churches and ruins of Italy. Perhaps there would be a stay in Paris for dancing or fencing lessons, or studying at the local art academies. But Alice's destination was not the ruins of Rome or the antiquities of Pisa. With her friend Gertrude by her

side, she breezed through Belgium and on to Germany. Pausing only long enough to be homesick in Berlin, she made straight for the distant city of Weimar. There she located the home of composer Franz Liszt, who had died a decade earlier, and talked her way in.

It took two attempts. On the first try, Drake and some of her new friends arrived too late in the afternoon and were forced to content themselves with gawking at Liszt's conservatory. Undaunted, they started again early the next morning. Drake tracked down the surprised caretaker, a "dear old man," and slipped him three pfennigs to persuade him to unlock the door.

She played on Liszt's pianos! She ogled his collection of gifts from the crowned heads of Europe! She prevailed upon the caretaker to autograph the back of a postcard for her (he'd lived with Liszt for twenty-seven years!).

In fact, she spent so long frolicking through the hallowed rooms that her happy little group almost missed their train, rushing from the house and catching it with only minutes to spare. They crowded into the compartment as it chugged out of the station, laughing and breathless, amazed that the caretaker had demanded such a small amount of money for access to such a treasure.

"I never tho't I would do that!" Drake wrote that night in her diary.

Gaining access to home of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was less satisfying. Although it had been her top priority upon arrival in Salzburg, the neighborhood was of dubious repute, with narrow, crooked streets and badly worn stone stairs. At one point, she had already pushed her way through the front door and made it all the way upstairs before discovering she was in the wrong house. Unconcerned, she tried again, but the small third-floor apartment filled with Mozart's birth cradle and family portraits failed to meet her expectations. Later she wrote, "I don't enthuse over his music so naturally all this didn't interest me as much. . . ."

At the house of the composer Wilhelm Richard Wagner, things were more difficult still. For the first time, the housekeeper proved reluctant to accept a bribe, and Drake was only allowed as far as the front yard. Later she fumed at how infuriating it was that this would be the one place in Germany where servants seemed immune to tipping.

"It is great fun to sit right next to some great artist and watch them," she wrote in December. When not trespassing, Alice Drake spent her time in Germany seeking out musical performances. Her operas of choice were all Wagner, but when his music wasn't available at the local Philharmonic, she was happy to settle for whatever was playing.

She carefully glued the remains of each concert into a scrapbook: playbills, tickets, and snippets of music. Also into the scrapbook went critiques of each production ("Sucha sang. Her voice is gone so she doesn't charm me in any way whatever."); gossip about the performers ("I think it is so strange we never heard of Alexander Petchnikoff in America. . . . He has recently married an American girl."); opinions about the players ("This is the autograph of the director of the orchestra. He isn't great."); and descriptions of each opera house, diagrams of orchestral positioning, and a catalog of her mental state leading up to and following each production. The state of her handwriting makes it likely that the notes were meant for her own eyes only.

For a performance of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, she wrote: "The Nibelungen Ring commenced this morning. We have tickets for every night. I'm positively holding my breath to see who sings Brunhild. Later: Of all the things in this world, Frauline Revil is on for Brunhild. Well that makes me ill. And raised prices at that. Anyway, Reno and Libau are always fine and it is a treat to hear the orchestra so I guess I can stand it. It is a terrible ordeal though really. . . ."

While in Berlin, Drake was granted an audition with renowned teacher Karl Heinrich Barth. Though the maid was hesitant to admit her, Drake prevailed, and she soon found herself in Barth's music room, hands trembling, gazing in awe at his two Bechstein grand pianos. The man himself arrived ("Golly! But he looked big!"). After playing a few movements ("Very musical," he told her), she was informed she'd managed to secure a coveted spot as one of his students. She marched away from the house grinning, in her words, "from ear to ear."

Yet when the time came for her first lesson a month later, she blew it off to see a performance of her favorite Wagner opera, *Siegfried*. The Kaiser himself was expected to attend.

A Musical Diagnosis

Musicomania, an excessive and uncontrollable love of music, was a real and serious pathological diagnosis for late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Americans. Young Alice Drake was not alone in her obsession; for everyone from clerks to society debutantes, industrialization brought a new approach to experiencing and enjoying what had previously been a relatively small-scale phenomenon. As the post–Civil War economy took hold, the country experienced massive social and cultural change. Urbanization! Railroads! A wage economy where people might spend their money on *anything they wanted*!

At the beginning of the century, music lovers might have contented themselves with gathering family around a piano after dinner, but now the growth of cities meant vast new concert halls. Whereas before they might attend their local church services, new transportation options such as streetcars and railways meant they could attend every church service in town. Preindustrialization,

the only option for entertainment would have been local troupes of neighborhood players, provincial and familiar. But now a vast network of traveling virtuosos had become household names, introducing audiences to an entire planet's supply of talent, exotic compositions, and the drama of celebrity culture.

It was a good time to listen to some Wagner! But many enthusiasts felt, why stop there? "They said, well that's great, but we want more. We want the experience to last. So they start to do things on their own, outside of that established 'one ticket for that performance' framework," says cultural historian Daniel Cavicchi. Listening to a concert was enjoyable, but why not collect its sheet music and programs, carefully mounted in scrapbooks? Or stand for hours below a soloist's hotel balcony to catch a glimpse of her face? Or attend every performance of a show, returning again and again to critique how the music sounded from each part of the concert hall? Or travel to Weimar, Germany, to break into Liszt's house?

Young ladies forsook their gentlemen callers for the opera. Office workers bankrupted themselves for just one more performance. Music teachers rushed the stage and hugged the musicians. Middle-aged women stood in their seats and screamed with delight. Obviously, something had to be done.

The close of the American Civil War also fomented a wave of social reformers intent on doing good. The crusade opposing musicomania, while never reaching the fervor of the temperance or abstinence movements, was still a force. Not enough, these activists felt, that a new wave of immigrant culture had already imperiled the purity of truly American music; this new breed of music lover also had no idea how to enjoy it properly. Music should be experienced with self-restraint and a carefully moderated intellectual response, if any at all.

"The concert room was crowded with people clinging to each

other like bees," complained one scandalized Victorian concert attendee. "We saw bonnets torn off," gasped another. For the average Victorian, corseted into a tortuous letter B shape, then swathed in up to five layers of clothing, the unseemliness of the concert hall was abominable. It wasn't that Mozart or Wagner was necessarily a bad influence, but the unbridled emotions they inspired were contrary to every dictate of propriety. In respectable society, where even the most chaste skin-on-skin contact was practically an offer of engagement, a crowd of sweaty musicomaniacs trampling their neighbors in their enthusiasm would have been horrifying.

As Cavicchi notes, by 1833 the term "musicomania" had appeared in the *New Dictionary of Medical Science and Literature*. In those afflicted, "the passion for music is carried to such an extent as to derange the intellectual faculties."

And yet this excitement, this visceral freedom, may be a reason why so many Victorians found musical excess an effective outlet for their repressed longings. Music was rebellious. Music was pure, and good, and beautiful, even if (or perhaps explicitly because) outsiders didn't understand it. Music gave fellow devotees something to discuss and a reason to congregate. Music was something interesting to do.

And in a culture that barely tolerated the concept, music—and the people who made it, and the activities surrounding it, and the audience who liked it—was "fun."

To Fan Is Human

Humans have always experienced an urge to connect, with each other and with ourselves. It's an instinct buried so deep in our brains that we do it naturally, scanning our surroundings, always on the alert for bits of culture that might help us become a "better" us. From an evolutionary standpoint, a group of protohuman hunters

who could find something external to bond over were more likely to eat dinner that night, whether it was a shared love of the moon goddess or a shared disdain of those weird sun-goddess worshippers on the other side of the hill.

Fandom refers to the structures and practices that form around pieces of popular culture. It's a very old, very human phenomenon; acting in fanlike ways is probably as ancient as culture itself. History is filled with tales of pilgrimages—traveling to a place, not for its aesthetic or economic value, but simply to feel close to something important. Chaucer's fourteenth-century Canterbury-bound knight, cook, friar, physician, and other companions are traveling to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket. On the other side of the world, the Kii Peninsula of Japan is still crisscrossed with trails worn by pilgrims from a thousand years ago headed to the shrines of Kumano.

Margery Kempe is known today as the author of a large body of dramatic fiction: stories about family troubles, intrigue, trauma, and healing. Though generally described as autobiographical, her adventures weren't entirely of her own making. Kempe's writing was based on characters from the Bible—the best-known literary work of her time. By the time she died in 1438, she had amassed a novel-length tome of what today would be considered fan fiction, derivative writing that details the further adventures of Mary, Jesus, and other New Testament figures.

Sometimes she produced missing scenes to fill in time periods not present in the official text. Sometimes she imagined entirely original incidents. She pictures herself as a handmaiden to the Virgin Mary; she carries Joseph and Mary's bags when they go to visit family; and she brings a cocktail of wine, egg, and gruel to Mary's bedside to comfort her while she mourns Jesus. In other works Kempe incorporates her own pilgrimages into her stories; she imagines herself asking Mary for a swaddling cloth in which to wrap the

baby Jesus, based on a trip Kempe took to Assisi, where she viewed a similar relic.

The late-medieval world was saturated with religious imagery. Church songs, food taboos, spiritual art and architecture, special clothing, festivals, and complicated rituals, all were rich fodder for a creative mind. Modern scholars interpret these stories as a way to bring Kempe closer to her favorite book, linking her to the characters she wrote about and incorporating herself into their lives. She hoped to be canonized by the Church for her devotion; by becoming a saint she would complete her own assimilation into the words of the text she loved so much.

Kempe was not the first to explore this type of literary fiction—Franciscan nuns had tried it two hundred years earlier, encouraged by a popular religious text of the time, *Meditationes vitae Christi*. But nuns were technically part of the official religious infrastructure. Kempe was most decidedly not.

Even though the late medieval period in England was characterized by a new emphasis on personal empowerment, like the anti-musicomania of Victorian reformers five hundred years later, with that new freedom came significant opposition from both the church and the surrounding community. Not everyone was happy with Kempe's explorations.

Kempe, at least by her own account, faced scorn and public hostility for her behavior. Writing of herself in the third person, she said that at home in her village, "a reckless man . . . deliberately and on purpose threw a bowlful of water on her head." At York, she claimed, "she had many enemies who slandered her, scorned her, and despised her." Several times she was placed under what scholar Gail McMurray Gibson calls "casual house arrest" while the authorities decided what to do about her bizarre and disruptive emotional outbursts. Kempe even alleged that her enemies in the community wanted her

burned at the stake, but that may have been hyperbole. It's difficult to tell if her contemporaries viewed her as a dangerous holy woman or just wildly eccentric, since she herself seems to have taken a fair measure of pride in her own oppression.

The Democratization of Fandom

The difference between Margery Kempe, Alice Drake, and a modern-day fan camped outside a bookstore for the midnight drop of the next J. K. Rowling book isn't a question of enthusiasm. It's one of access.

It's easy to attribute the modern explosion in fandom to the increased connectivity of a tech-savvy audience. In terms of scale, this is certainly true. But fandom is predigital. It's also prephonograph. It's even preliteracy. Margery Kempe, as a merchant-class woman in the fifteenth century, could neither read nor write. All of her stories were dictated to a scribe. By the 1800s, a fan like Alice Drake had significantly more opportunity to interact with the object of her affection—she could listen to music regularly as long as she had some spare change and a nearby orchestra. Each successive technological gain has made fandom both more accessible and more social, but it has been part of human cultural activity throughout recorded history.

Over the centuries, advances in transportation, personal wealth, leisure time, and autonomy have meant fans have gained incrementally easier and more frequent access to the things they love. The Internet removes the final barrier, reducing the effort required to almost to zero. For media lovers, most audio, video, or literary texts can be summoned with a finger tap. For fans of a brand, the Internet allows products to be discovered, compared, and ordered without a visit to the mall. For fans of an activity, finding instructions on how

to do it (and others to do it with) is now trivial. For the celebrity-obsessed, the Internet provides a whole universe of access to the private lives of the famous—their creative process, daily routine, opinions, and the occasional naked picture.

Prior to the nineteenth century, there were a limited number of "texts," the official canon of work available to an audience, that encouraged this type of multichannel approach. Religion provides one of the few examples—Kempe couldn't read her Bible, but she could visit the locations mentioned in it, participate in rituals inspired by it, sing songs about it, and, of course, make up stories.

Broad cultural trends sometimes had the same effect. A fashionable French citizen who felt enamored of American culture in the late 1700s could travel to America and fight in the revolution against Great Britain, but many also wrote pamphlets supporting the cause; commissioned paintings about the glory of American principles; ate turkey, corn, and other New World foods; or wore tiny portraits of Benjamin Franklin in their hair. But these were exceptions in a world that placed little emphasis on such ancillary activities.

The modern term *fan object* is what we now call these centers of emotion and activity, pieces of culture that inspire both loyalty, and, more importantly, activity. When finding and being close to a fan object required so much energy, the result was a very limited range of audience engagement. Almost all of it relied on simple interactions: reading a book meant readers would travel to a bookstore or library, acquire it, bring it home, and then read it. Perhaps they talked to friends about it. They might read it again at some point. But unless they had access to their own printing press and a lot of spare time, few would try to add to it. The interaction was usually one-way. No matter how good the book might be, the barriers to joining in meant that it primarily inspired consumption, not participation.