

Online Academics:

The Wiki TV Tropes as a Community of Pseudo-Academic Producers

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by  
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## Abstract

TV Tropes is a fan wiki that allows its users to create and edit pages describing popular works of fiction and the narrative features common to those works. In my first chapter, I explain that site users have organically but consciously developed a distinctive form of discourse which enables them to communicate more effectively and to establish their authority in a medium largely divorced from real-world identities. This discourse has been used to develop a community within the site which debates the themes of and connections among favorite texts. This community bears striking similarities to academic communities, in that community-members use an established, specialized discourse to engage in the analysis of texts and knowledge-creation.

Henry Jenkins was among the first scholars to assert that fans are more than passive consumers of cultural products: they are producers of communities and content related to those cultural products, and in producing, they shape the way those cultural products are received and understood. I build upon Jenkins' ideas, arguing that TV Tropes is an example of fans producing a community and content which are very similar to academic communities and content, despite obvious differences. Thus TV Tropes is an example of fans engaging in pseudo-academic modes of engagement and production, in addition to the modes previously described by Jenkins.



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## Introduction

The most reproduced New Yorker cartoon of all time portrays two dogs, one on a chair at a desk with a computer, the other on the floor, listening to his companion. The cartoon is captioned, “On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog.” Since 1993, this cartoon has been held up as exemplary of anonymity online. ([Fleishman 2000](#)) Although it represents an impossible situation, this cartoon suggests frightening possibilities—just whom are we talking to online?

Anonymous discussion has a way of mixing things up. With the traditional context for interpretation of a person's credibility gone, internet users must use new criteria to evaluate their conversational partners. Users of the internet cannot rely on age, race, nationality, profession, or education in order to determine to whom they are speaking. Even when an internet user tries to provide proof of their real-world identity, they can not necessarily be trusted. Categories such as profession and education, previously considered all-important in determining a person's credibility, are thus replaced by membership in online groups: the groups a person belongs to in an online community, and how long they have belonged to those groups and the community itself, are among the first and most important things that an internet user considers when trying to evaluate that person's credibility. The very few social cues available in an almost-anonymous community take on incredible significance. Traditional methods of evaluating credibility, such as evaluating the writing styles of others, are still employed, but these are not the most important things that internet users take into consideration in

online communication.

These different ways of establishing credibility can lead to incredible situations.

Author J. K. Rowling told this story in an interview:

JKR: I discovered MuggleNet [a popular Harry Potter fan community] ...

and I went in the chatroom, and it was so funny. I was treated with outright contempt. [Laughter] It was funny, I can't tell you.

Interviewer and MuggleNet Creator: I'd like to apologize for, uh -

JKR: No, no no no, not in a horrible way, but, "Yeah, yeah, shut up, you're not a regular, you don't know a thing." You can imagine! (Sparks and Anelli 2005)

In the real world, the creator of the fan site MuggleNet was shocked and incredibly pleased to be granted a relatively short interview with the author of the popular novels he loved. On that site, however, Rowling was essentially divorced from her actual identity. Although she was not actually anonymous, no one knew who she was beyond her screen name and whatever information she chose to provide and they chose to believe. There is unquestionably no greater authority on the Harry Potter books than their author, but anonymous online communication, especially with regards to the establishment of a persona, is so different from communication which is connected to a known identity that her attempted contributions to MuggleNet's conversation were entirely ignored.

People can also have more perceived credibility online than they would in other types of interactions. In the famous Wikipedia Essay controversy, a twenty four-year-old

college drop-out successfully impersonated a college professor with numerous advanced degrees under the pseudonym “Essjay,” becoming an influential editor of Wikipedia and even a paid employee of Wikia, an associated organization, before his fraud was revealed. His account was registered in 2005, and although concerns about the veracity of his claims about his real identity were first raised in 2006, he was hired by Wikia in January 2007 and was not asked to step down until March 2007, after *The New Yorker* had run a correction of a previous article which revealed that he was actually a young man named Ryan Jordan with no college degrees. The incident was reported widely online and in the print edition of *The New York Times*, making it one of the first relatively widely-publicized cases of someone assuming a false identity online for non-malicious purposes. Although fear of child predators impersonating children or scam artists impersonating Nigerian princes was already widespread, this was the first major instance of someone using the anonymity of the internet to become influential within an important project in a way that likely would not have been possible had he used his real-life credentials. His motivations were not nefarious, and even other Wikipedia editors had mixed reactions to his deception: some supported him entirely while others denounced his actions. The difficulty of accurately determining who is credible online and who is not can lead to more than one type of misjudgment which would have been far less likely prior to the existence of large online communities. (Anon. 2012. “Essjay Controversy.” *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia.*)

Anonymity has long made the establishment of online identity a difficult task.

Online communities have developed ways to establish *ethos* and group membership, which are often the same thing when one is operating online, using the few identifying traits available to them. Many communities have developed particular modes of speech which serve both to establish membership of a group and to make communication within the group more effective. This discourse tends to exclude newcomers while they try to understand the modes of discourse used by the communities they are attempting to join. This may seem to be unfortunate for some groups, but these mechanisms of exclusion play the important role of excluding from participation users who have not yet learned the rules of the site. When a site is open to all internet users, its operational efficiency depends upon its ability to use informal methods of creating and delimiting community.

Online communities and communication have long gone understudied, despite the fact that hyper-mediated and technologically-aware individuals who use sites like TV Tropes likely indicate the future of online communication in general. TV Tropes presents a robust model for productive, collaborative online interaction which requires very little supervision. This is an area ripe for study, and some of the principles operating on TV Tropes could be adapted to be useful in other online communities.

This thesis describes TV Tropes as an online pseudo-academic community, that is, as a community engaged in collective analysis of texts and knowledge-creation. Recent study of fan communities has focused on their capacity for creation; I argue that fan communities can be potent sites of specifically pseudo-academic creation.

The background section of this thesis seeks to explain how TV Tropes works and

to define terms so that the topic can be understood by anyone without prior familiarity with the site. The first chapter of this thesis points out particularly unusual or prominent features of TV Tropes' discourse and explains how they are used by TV Tropes editors to communicate more effectively or determine who does or does not understand the typical use of the site.

The second chapter of this thesis posits that TV Tropes shares important similarities with academic communities, such as the use of a specialized discourse and the critical analysis of texts. Fan communities have formerly been acknowledged as sites of content production, but have not been discussed at length as sites of academic production. One of the only online communities to have been discussed as a pseudo-academic community is *Fandom Wank*, to which TV Tropes is compared in the second section of the second chapter.

It is important to realize that fans are not simply passive consumers of media. Many fans not only read or watch a text but also go online and discuss it, comparing it to other texts and creating other texts in the process. Where before media producers, especially of television and movies, often imagined their viewers as watching and receiving, fans now take an active role and subvert the expectations of a particular text's creators. This has already led to a change in the relationship between producers and audiences, and the trend will only continue. In order to understand the modern relationship among creator, creation, and adoring public, one must acknowledge and understand fans as productive consumers. (Anderson)

### Background

TV Tropes is a wiki, like Wikipedia: it is a communally-created online document. The site has an established structure and conventions, but the structure and conventions are dictated by those who use the site, and any user can sign up and start creating or editing pages at any time. The wiki structure is commonly used by fan communities because it allows fans to collect and organize information themselves rather than waiting for a separate authority to do so. Fans, though united by shared appreciation of creative works, make those works their own by themselves controlling the places where they talk about them. TV Tropes is unique among fan wikis, however, in that it does not limit its scope to a single book, TV show or video game. TV Tropes encourages participation by fans of all creative works, and is thus one of the largest fan communities and wikis on the internet today with 191,745 articles as of March 1, 2013. (“List of largest wikis”)

TV Tropes originated in 2004, having grown out of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* online community. As fans discussed *Buffy* and other television shows on a site called Buffistas, they noticed that they encountered certain fictional situations and character types frequently enough that they were assigned commonly understood names. As Newitz says, “Buffistas members could talk about the 'maiden in distress trope,' for example, and everyone would know what that meant.” ([Newitz 2012](#)) Buffistas members eventually created TV Tropes as a place to explore their idea of tropes in relation to other works of popular culture.

TV Tropes bills itself as “a catalog of the tricks of the trade for writing fiction”;

these tricks are called tropes, which the site further defines as, “devices and conventions that a writer can reasonably rely on as being present in the audience members' minds and expectations” (Anon. “[Home Page - Television Tropes & Idioms.](#)”). For example, the most commonly used trope within the site is that of the “Big Bad” (Illustration 1), defined as “The cause of all bad happenings in a story”(Anon. “[Big Bad - Television Tropes & Idioms.](#)”). Works on TV Tropes have their own pages within the site, and that page will, if the work contains a “Big Bad”, describe the “Big Bad” within the work and link back to that trope page. Thus the *Othello* page describes Iago as the Big Bad, and the *Harry Potter* page graces Voldemort with that title.

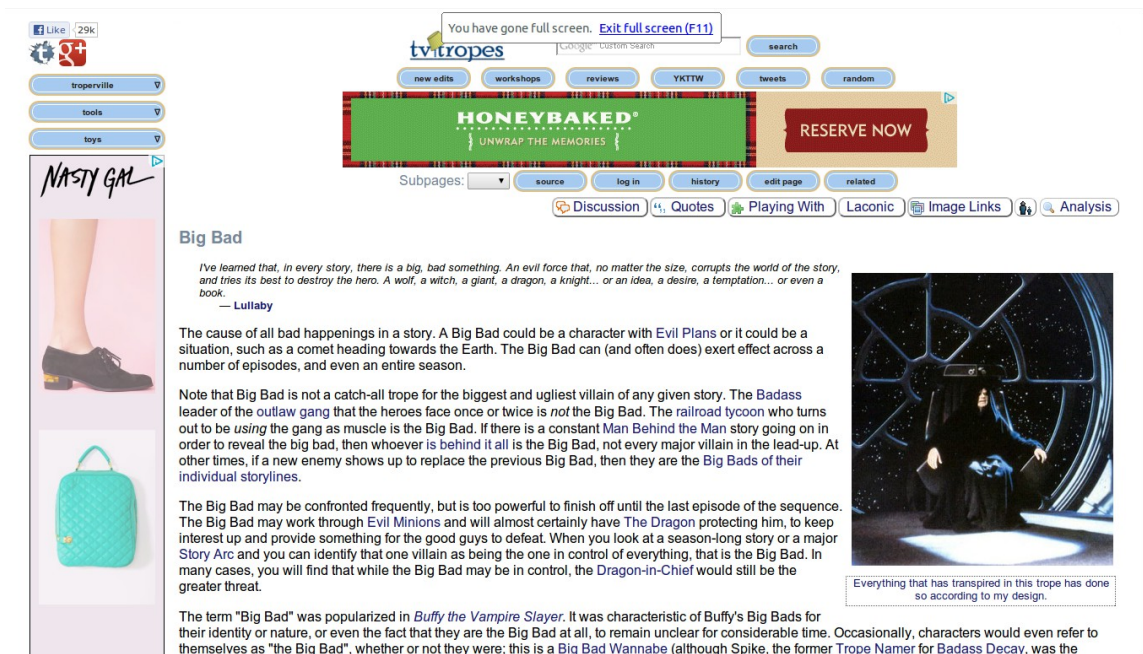


Illustration 1: [A screenshot of the TV Tropes page for the trope "Big Bad."](#)

More importantly than being a compendium of information, TV Tropes is a meta-

text created by and for fans of TV shows, movies, novels, and other types of media. TV Tropes is what happens when fans stop passively appreciating a creative work and start analyzing, dissecting and interrogating it. Assigning names to tropes and identifying those tropes within works doesn't on the surface sound like a fun activity, but it encourages reflection on a beloved book or TV show and can be the start of a lively discussion if two TV Tropes editors find that they disagree. The organization of the site also encourages exploration and can help fans to discover previously unconsidered connections between creative works.

Fans who simply passively explore and read the site without changing it are called, for the purposes of this thesis, site readers. These site readers read the online text which other fans have created, but they do not make changes to what is present. The fans who create and curate site pages are called editors. Anyone can edit the site, but the majority of site users and visitors do not.

This distinction between reader and editor leads to a second distinction between “public” and “private” parts of the site. These terms are technically inaccurate because most any part of the site can be accessed by any user, but they are useful and descriptive of the distinction between parts of the site meant for readers and parts meant for editors. “Public” pages are those which constitute TV Tropes the text, including pages about works of popular culture, such as the aforementioned *Othello* page, and pages about the tropes that appear in those works, such as the “Big Bad” page. The “private” parts of the site are those which facilitate the creation of this online text, such as pages which allow

editors to edit public pages, pages which show the history of edits made to a public page, forums which allow discussion of tropes and the pages devoted to them, and site mechanisms which help editors to workshop and create new pages devoted to tropes and cultural works. Just as the more well-known Wikipedia is both a text and a community, so do the parts of the site TV Tropes serve two distinct purposes, with public pages comprising a text intended for consumption by readers and private pages serving editors who create that public text. ([Reagle 2010](#))

One of the main ways that readers and editors explore TV Tropes is by following links from page to page. If a page is not referred to by enough other pages, readers and editors will not see it and it will not be updated and corrected. A TV Tropes page that simply exists is not helpful; it must also be seen by at least a few TV Tropes users so that it can become part of the group consciousness. The site automatically counts how many pages link to a given page; those connections are called “wicks” after Morgan Wick, a troper who, before the site counted these links automatically, went through and counted them himself. The number of wicks a page has—that is, the number of pages that link to it—is generally considered a good indicator of whether or not that page is adequately connected to the rest of the site. “Adequately connected” is generally considered to be fourteen wicks or higher. If a page has fewer wicks than that, it will not be viewed very often and the information it contains may be underdeveloped; the site automatically maintains a list of pages with fourteen or fewer wicks and editors are encouraged to link other pages to them in order to drive traffic their way. (Anon. “[Wick - Television Tropes](#)

& Idioms.”) Making sure that mistakes are frequently seen and corrected makes sure that TV Tropes is accurate and that it maintains its credibility. A page that has enough wicks undergoes an informal but continual version of “peer review” and proofreading.

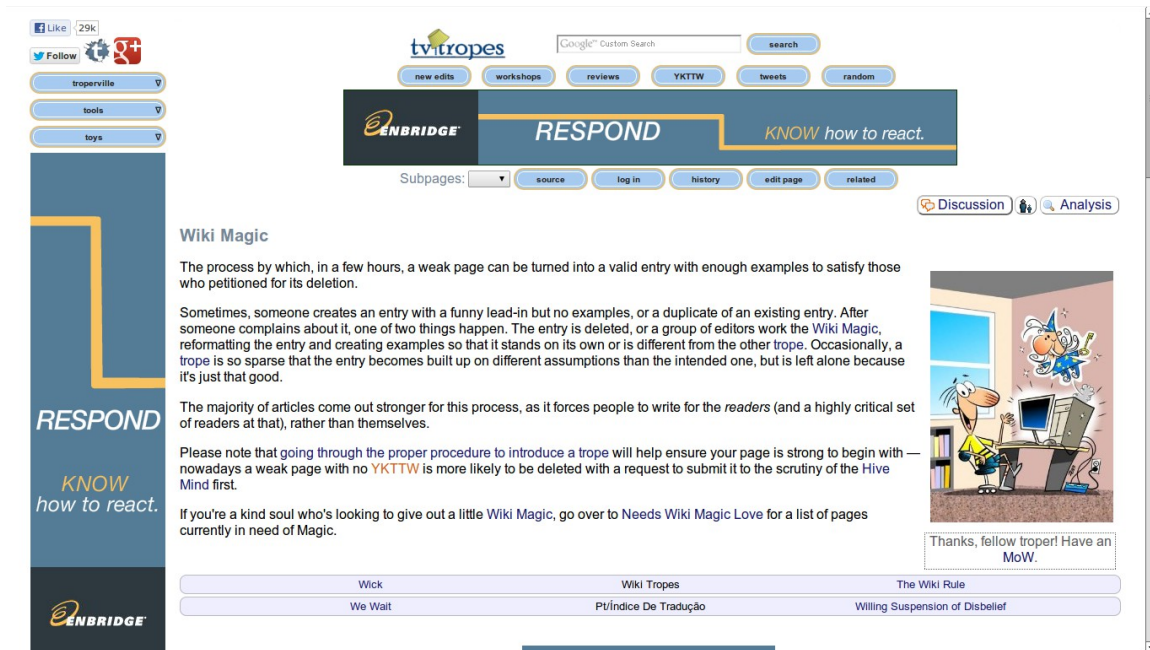


Illustration 2: [The TV Tropes page for Wiki Magic.](#)

Once a page has enough wicks, “Wiki Magic” can take effect. Wiki Magic is the term that TV Tropes editors use to describe the power of collaborative editors, calling it, “The process by which, in a few hours, a weak page can be turned into a valid entry with enough examples to satisfy those who petitioned for its deletion.” Sometimes this process is initiated when one editor suggests deleting a weak page and other editors who like the page work together to fix it.<sup>1</sup> Wiki Magic works more subtly, however, when a page with enough wicks becomes out of date as a matter of course or is vandalized by a

<sup>1</sup> It should be mentioned that changes to TV Tropes pages can be traced back to the users who make those changes: TV Tropes editors are anonymous in the sense that their online persona does not indicate anything about their real-world identity. TV Tropes editors still operate under one identifiable persona online, labeled by their user name.

random user. Because wicks throughout the site are linking editors to this page, the page will be updated or reverted to its un-vandalized state rather quickly. Wiki Magic can also make a page stronger by adding examples to trope pages or tropes to work pages, by sorting those entries, and by making it more visually appealing. (Anon. “[Wiki Magic - Television Tropes & Idioms](#).”)

It's important to note that Wiki Magic works best when as many editors as possible participate in the editing process, so long as those editors are knowledgeable about the private parts of the site and the site customs in general. There are many mechanisms within the site which help editors avoid making mistakes, but these mechanisms can only work when editors are aware of and take advantage of them. (Ebersbach)

### Chapter One: TV Tropes' Specialized Discourse

Modes of discourse are central to the creation of communities, including but not limited to academic communities. As David Bartholomae says of students learning to use academic discourse,

The students have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and they have to do this as though they were easily and comfortably one with their audience, as though they were members of the academy, or historians or anthropologists or economists; they have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline. They must learn to speak our language. (Bartholomae, 403)

Naturally, this practice of using language to assert membership in a group, in some cases even using language to define a group, also exists online. Language has different possibilities online than in traditional modes of communication, but many online communities still use language as an important method of self-definition. TV Tropes' discourse developed as TV Tropes editors sought to communicate more effectively, but is also used by experienced editors to identify who understands the site and who does not.

In this section, I will attempt to describe TV Tropes' discourse, as well as the ways in which it can be used to establish oneself and others as belonging or not belonging to the pseudo-academic community of TV Tropes. It is important to acknowledge, however,

that any understanding of TV Tropes which relies entirely upon an understanding of its discourse is incomplete. Bartholomae said of a student trying to imitate the language of more experienced academics, “He is trying on the discourse even though he doesn't have the knowledge that makes the discourse more than a routine, a set of conventional rituals and gestures. And he does this, I think, even though he *knows* he doesn't have the knowledge that makes the discourse more than routine” (Bartholomae, 404). Although there is hopefully enough information about TV Tropes in the following pages to provoke further exploration, it is important that no explanation or analysis of discourse be taken as complete. The discourse itself exists not only as rhetorical convention but also as a way of understanding and invoking collective intelligence. Examples of elements of discourse mentioned herein are just that: examples, hopefully representative of the site's customs, but not necessarily the most prominent or recent.

TV Tropes editors intend for public pages to be easily understood by the layperson, and editors craft pages to standards which facilitate this understanding. (Anon. “[How to Write an Example - Television Tropes & Idioms.](#)”) Private pages, however, are rife with language and stylistic techniques specific to TV Tropes and are often difficult to understand right away. (Anon. “[TV Tropes Will Ruin Your Vocabulary - Television Tropes & Idioms.](#)”) This specialized discourse developed naturally within the community to facilitate communication, but, as will be shown, it also serves to keep editors who lack experience or dedication from participating on the private pages of the site.

Editors on TV Tropes are anonymous in the sense that their online personae are not connected to their actual identities. Although TV Tropes editors must make accounts which have names associated with them, the vast majority of interactions between TV Tropes editors will occur as if between strangers: although a user name is present, it is highly unlikely to be recognized and could not be connected to the user's real identity. For the intents and purposes of this thesis, editors are anonymous. Thus when two TV Tropes editors disagree, they are in the dark about the credentials of the person with whom they are in conflict. The only way they can learn about each other is through what they say to each other. Outright declarations of authority, such as claiming seniority on the site or an academic position in the real world, are likely to be considered petty or be mistrusted. And so editors use the specialized discourse of TV Tropes to express their familiarity with the site and to challenge that of their opponent.

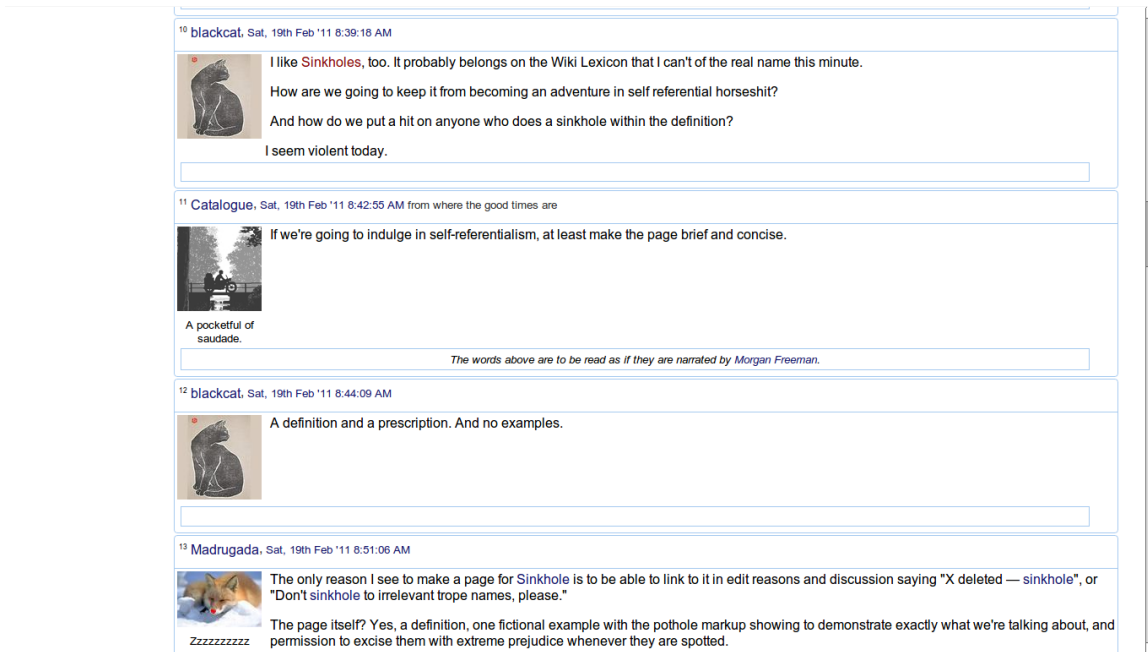
TV Tropes' discourse can be used to prove one's familiarity with the site in a number of ways. Many parts of the site are referred to using initialisms, such as YKTTW ([You Know That Thing Where](#)), the meanings of which are not apparent without prior experience. In addition, some trope pages have very confusing or misleading names; “The Dragon,” for instance, refers not necessarily to an actual dragon but to the main enforcer of the “Big Bad”. (Anon. “[The Dragon - Television Tropes & Idioms](#).”) By frequently using counterintuitive names of less common tropes and by demonstrating an understanding of the tropes and the relationships between them, a savvy editor forces his or her conversational partner to slow down while proving familiarity with the site. There

are also conventions which are used in online conversation in general which can help an editor subtly prove his or her superiority. The symbol “^”, for example, when used at the beginning of a forum posting, denotes the comment to which the poster is responding. One “^” would usually be omitted, because that would indicate a response to the post immediately preceding it. A post beginning with two “^”s, however, refers to the post before the post immediately preceding it, and so on. Although often unconsciously used, all of these facets of TV Tropes' discourse help an editor prove their authority.

The site and its discourse developed from and continue to be influenced by many fan discourses. Most directly, TV Tropes' definition and handling of tropes arose out of the desire to define and discuss certain terms which often came up in discussions on the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fan site Buffistas. Fans of the show found themselves describing certain character types and situations over and over again in many different contexts. The phrases they used to refer to these recurring themes, such as “damsel in distress trope”, already constituted a specialized discourse. (Newitz 2012) In the process of describing this discourse of what they called “tropes”, early TV Tropes users created another discourse. Familiarity with both styles of discourse is advantageous in using the site.

Potholing is one rhetorical strategy which TV Tropes editors use to prove their mastery of TV Tropes' discourse. Editors who, for example, wish to label a character from a work as exemplifying a certain trope without specifically mentioning that trope can make that character's name a link to the trope that character exemplifies. Although

often a useful practice on public pages, potholing is especially common in arguments on private pages. Potholing can draw on fan knowledge outside of the topic at hand and thus advertise that an editor has made more and deeper connections than their conversational “opponent.” It can demonstrate that one knows more about a certain work than another, or prove that one has read or studied a “high-brow” work without technically bragging or showing off. Potholing is also often used to subtly insult one's conversational partner. (Anon. “[Pot Hole - Television Tropes & Idioms.](#)”)



*Illustration 3: [A discussion about potential problems when creating the Sinkhole page.](#)*

Potholing can be an effective way to convey information and prove one's authority as a TV Trope's editor, but excessive, unnecessary potholing can be distracting and misleading. For this reason, certain TV Tropes editors began discussing the practice of excessive potholing and decided that it needed a name. This discussion, though informal,

focuses on important concerns about the negative effect this practice has on the site. They quickly come up with a name for it, “sinkholing”, and begin workshoping a page to describe it. Editors anticipate problems the page may suffer, such as becoming too self-referential, and postulate ways to prevent this (the beginning of this discussion is shown in Illustration 3). They predict that the term will be useful in describing why revisions to a public page are necessary. This conversation, preserved in the form of forum postings, demonstrates how a TV Tropes page can be created and shows that TV Tropes editors are aware both of the existence and the effect of their specialized discourse. These particular editors came together and discussed and implemented strategies to improve their discourse. (Anon. “[Gratuitous Potholing - TV Tropes Forum](#).”)

In any case, potholing and other rhetorical strategies, as well as the other qualities of TV Tropes' discourse, can be very confusing to a relatively new user of the private parts of the site. This can be helpful to editors when they try to prove their superior qualifications, but it prevents new users from participating fully in the community. Any community, especially online, develops a specialized discourse, but TV Tropes, which supposedly welcomes all users, has some of the most confusing discourse of any site. Online communities like Reddit and Tumblr also develop their own discourse, but this discourse is much easier for newcomers to understand than that of TV Tropes. TV Tropes editors are trying to compose an almost academic document and they must therefore have at least some control over who can join their community.

TV Tropes' discourse thus performs double duty: it serves as an important tool of

identification for experienced editors and prevents the involvement of those who are not equipped to contribute productively.<sup>2</sup> For any community attempting to engage in academic thinking, something must prevent the participation of those who can not be helpful and productive. In an academic community, for example, one must be employed by an academic institution and be published in journals: these are the barriers of participation which allow the community to operate effectively. TV Tropes attempts to do academic work in the absence of these strict and clearly defined barriers of participation, so it must and has developed other ways of preventing the participation of those who would make the work of TV Tropes editors more difficult. TV Tropes' discourse is its main tool in preventing the interference of inexperienced editors.

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<sup>2</sup> Although they cannot be fully discussed here, the ideas of Kenneth Burke would likely be highly illuminating when applied to an analysis of TV Tropes or a similar online community.

## Chapter Two

### Section One: TV Tropes Editors as Fan-Academics

In the introduction to his book *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins asserts that media consumers have in recent years, and especially with the help of the internet, gained access to the means of media production and become producers. (Anderson) As he says, “Game companies give the public access to their design tools, publicize the best results, and hire the top amateur programmers. The amateur subtitling and circulation of anime arguably helped to open the market for Asian cultural imports” (Jenkins, 2). In his essay, “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten”, Jenkins posits that fans are not fans merely by the simple fact of their consumption or enjoyment of a creative work; he suggests that fans by their nature use that creative work to form a community and to themselves become producers. He elaborates further:

One becomes a 'fan' not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a 'community' of other fans who share common interests. For fans, consumption naturally sparks production, reading generates writing, until the terms seem logically inseparable (Jenkins, 41).

For Jenkins, not only are fans able to be producers, the act of producing follows naturally from the act of consuming, for example, a television program. Fans, by creating

communities and their own creative works, reinterpret and add to the text. They often experience the text in ways not intended by the author, and *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* can be read as a celebration of this transgressive power: where before fans were understood to be passively receptive of culture, Jenkins constructs fans as important sites of cultural creation. He even asserts that fans have the power to engage with texts on an intellectual level, and that their viewpoints should not therefore be considered irrelevant when texts in which they are invested are discussed. Jenkins elaborates on the intellectual power of fans, saying,

I would say that academic theory production is simply one subcultural or institutional practice among many. It doesn't need to be separated out from those other kinds of theory; it has its own language, its own goals, its own systems of circulation, and fans are inevitably locked out of that. But many of them are trained academics, librarians, or teachers, many of them decided consciously not to become academics, having had some exposure to academic knowledge, and many of them are professionals in other sectors. To say that they don't have intellectual capital is a bizarre statement (Jenkins, 13).

Jenkins rejects traditional academic ways of considering fans, suggesting that fan interpretations of texts can be active and useful and that the identities of fan and academic are not irreconcilable.

Although Jenkins is certainly not wrong, he does not apply his concept of fan-

producers to fans performing work of an academic nature. When he refers to fan-academics or aca/fen<sup>3</sup>, Jenkins is referring to academics who are also fans; he does not extend his earlier argument and say that fans can perform work which bears important similarities to academic work without being academics, just as fans can perform the work of cultural production without being established as producers. He elevates the work of the fan, but persists in constructing academia and fandom as totally separate. He says of himself, “I’d lived my entire life as a fan. I could be accused of putting on airs by becoming an academic, but I could scarcely be accused of slumming it” (Jenkins, 13). Even for Jenkins, whose academic work is as closely tied with fandom as any could be, the pursuits of academia and fandom are separate, no matter how closely entwined. He nowhere acknowledges the possibility that academia and fandom are simply two approaches to the same task, that they are no more different than the trappings and traditions associated with them.

Matt Hills, it must be mentioned, is critical of Jenkins' scholarship on fans. Hills, in his 2002 work *Fan Cultures*, defines the term “fan-academic” as, “The fan who uses academic theorising within their fan writing and within the construction of a scholarly fan identity, as opposed to the professional academic who draws on their fandom as a badge of distinction within the academy” (Hills, 2). Matt Hills, unlike other theorists, does not see fans and the work of fandom as inherently different from academics and the work of academia; he suggests however that academia as a value-system defines itself in

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3 Jenkins' pluralization of “fan.”

opposition to fandom, that is, in opposition to amateur consumption and analysis of texts.<sup>4</sup> As he says, “Academic practice—regardless of its favored theorists and theoretical frameworks—typically transforms fandom into an absolute Other” (Hills, 5). Hills also points out that previous fandom studies have tended to view academic discourse as necessarily superior to fan discourse, and that scholars who study fans-as-scholars tend to ignore evident and important differences between the two. For example, academics tend to focus on formal aspects of fan communities because these match formal aspects of academic communities. Scholars have not in the past acknowledged that the informal aspects of fan communities are among the most crucial and influential within a community, choosing instead to emphasize the similarities between fandom and academia because they can easily identify those similarities and are comfortable praising them. Even Hills, however, does not extend his ideas and suggest that fans can perform pseudo-academic work.

In the context of Hill's and Jenkin's work, this omission makes sense. The fans they study are more likely to be fan-producers than fan-academics: they may analyze their text, but they are far more likely to compose parallel texts, in the case of the fan fiction writers Jenkins describes in “Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking,” or appropriate and redefine other aspects of their text, as described in “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten.” When considering a fan community dedicated entirely to the analysis of particular texts, however, it is hard not to come to the conclusion that fans can

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<sup>4</sup> The othering of fans and fan communities is one way in which academic communities (especially, until recently, academic communities which study fans and the consumption of media) define themselves, as discussed by Bartholomae.

perform academic work, without being academics, just as they can become producers in other ways.

It is important to establish that TV Tropes users do not consider themselves academics, nor do they attempt to engage with academics. When they engage academic ideas, as in the “Death of the Author” page discussed in section two, it is with an air of appropriation rather than admiration or adoption. TV Tropes users go beyond simply understanding academic ideas: when they consider an academic idea important enough to be subsumed into their system of understanding, TV Tropes users feel comfortable challenging that idea or applying it in new ways rather than simply trying to understand how it has already been used by academics. TV Tropes users are what Jenkins calls participatory fans, in contrast to fans who simply consume media, but they are still fans. Even those editors who might have academic backgrounds approach their work of analysis from the perspective of a fan.

Yet TV Tropes is a distinctly academic document. The work of describing and categorizing tropes and texts requires TV Tropes editors to engage in scholarly discussions which constitute a form of academic engagement with those texts, often in defiance of media producers' expectations of how their works will be received. These discussions, as previously mentioned, use a specially developed discursive style which allows them to communicate efficiently and establish their membership in an academic community, as Bartholomae describes. TV Tropes is identified as a pseudo-academic work by the type and language of conversations occurring on the site.

TV Tropes' culture is also one of skepticism. Editors hold each other accountable for the content they create, and both their specialized discourse and the structures of the site enable them to do so. There is no outright barrier to participation in the TV Tropes community, but their language and practices ensure that the site runs smoothly. Perhaps most significantly, TV Tropes editors are skeptical of the very works they analyze, considering neither those texts nor their creators to be infallible. Though they are fans, TV Tropes editors go beyond simple adoration of a text. Their primary task of exploring the relationships among storytelling devices requires by its very nature that TV Tropes editors interrogate the allusions employed and expectations raised by those devices. They ask why a certain trope was used, debate whether or not it was used effectively, develop a better understanding of one work by analyzing it relative to another. Most TV Tropes editors do not have qualifications through degrees and publications; those who do are not given special consideration. Despite this, they collectively compose an academic text in an academic way, without giving up or subordinating their identities as fans.

Fans and academics have long been posited as separate categories, and there are of course significant differences between fans who analyze texts recreationally and academics who do so professionally. The similarities between these two groups of people can not, however, be ignored. To ignore new approaches to academic problems limits one's understanding of "academia" as a concept. It is important to understand both the ways in which academia can continue to define itself in opposition to fan communities, and the characteristics of academia which are common to all efforts of knowledge-

creation, however informal or insignificant they may seem.

Jenkins suggests the importance of reconciling the identities and labors of academics and fans when he says, “We all bring our own baggage to that conversation, which is to say that the identities of the fan-academic or the academic-fan are always problematic ones that have to be sorted through, even though I think there's more freedom to shed that issue today” (Jenkins, 15). The existence of TV Tropes and other such sites suggests that the task of reconciling identities need not be quite so difficult. Left alone, fan conversation on the site *Buffistas* developed naturally into a thriving pseudo-academic community. Perhaps fans and academics are not so different: perhaps academics are simply fans taken to their logical conclusion, fans with enough education and experience in a field to attempt to claim authority. If this is the case, it would seem that fans are academics without the institution of academia.<sup>5</sup>

To establish that the work of the academic and the fan are essentially the same would be a difficult task. It would require the establishment of some trait or set of traits “essential” to academia, traits which may or may not exist. To start arguing that the work of the academic and the fan are on one level the same, it is helpful to establish the ways in which they are not.

Fans do not have official credentials, nor do they hope to have their work published in official repositories of knowledge. Fans, once they have found a community to share in their enthusiasm, are far less likely to concern themselves with the wider

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5 To clarify, this thesis does not posit that fans are academics or that academics are fans; it merely asserts that academics share a central task—the analysis of texts and the creation of knowledge—with the fans here discussed. There are obviously many significant differences between fans and academics.

implications or importance of their investigations. The otherwise academic creations of fans tend not to take on the formality of what would be easily and unambiguously identified as “academic.” Because they do not concern themselves with questions of significance, relevance or quality of work, most of what fans produce is of less academic value than what is produced with specifically academic intentions. Perhaps the most obvious distinction between fans and academics is that fans are not paid for their analytical work.

These dissimilarities are, for the purposes of this argument, insignificant. In the simplest terms, participatory fans who perform academic work and actual academics are both people who investigate a question about a text, find an answer or a new way to think about the question, and report their findings to their colleagues; in the simplest possible terms, they are both engaged in the creation of new knowledge. Henry Jenkins rejected traditional views of fans as passive consumers, instead asserting that, for a fan, to consume content was to necessitate some type of creation. He does not, however take his argument further and say that fans are also capable of theorizing cultural content much like academics, without compromising their identities as fans.

To say that fans are academics by another name would have a certain dramatic flair, but would not be accurate. Only in the past several decades have scholars begun to study fan cultures and communities with respect and context, and further study of such communities is necessary before bold, sweeping statements can be made. I assert, however, that the work performed and the way in which it is performed on TV Tropes and

other sites is distinctly academic in nature, without aspiring or pretending to be anything more than purely the work of fans.

### Section Two: TV Tropes and Fandom Wank

An example of an informal fan-created text which is nevertheless written by fan-academics is the site *Fandom Wank*, discussed by Kathryn Dunlap and Carissa Wolf in their 2010 article, “Fans Behaving Badly: Anime Metafandom, Brutal Criticism, and the Intellectual Fan.” The paper discusses *Fandom Wank* as an irreverent and dynamic site of critical conversation among fans. *Fandom Wank* is a small community and can be crude, but it is a vibrant site of analysis by fans. *Fandom Wank* users are particularly interested in discussing and dissecting the interactions of other fans; when there is conflict within a fan community, *Fandom Wank* users enjoy pointing it out. *Fandom Wank* and TV Tropes users perform similar self-consciously analytical work, so a comparison of the two is useful despite their differences.

Dunlap and Wolf analyze the memes used in two particular discussions in order to determine what kinds of discourse are most often used, to the point of being part of the language of *Fandom Wank*. They say of memes,

Memes are different forms of repeated text, code, or other patterns, but user-level memes are most significant for this study. These memes circulate quickly and play a significant role within online communities, each with cultural and social capital. Communities with vast memberships like the FW community create memes specific to their members, some that they identify themselves as memes and some that they categorize as slang, definitions, or in-jokes but that otherwise share the same function within

community practices. (Dunlap and Wolf)

In analyzing these memes, Dunlap and Wolf found that most fell into one of three categories: “community identification”, “self-organizing activities”, or “improving discussion”. Although many memes took the form of insults or inside jokes, there were also many instances of specific textual criticism, and the majority of memes used served on whatever level to enhance *Fandom Wank* as a community. Insults were used to criticize the fans they observed or to enforce *Fandom Wank* rules and etiquette. Inside jokes reinforced a sense of community and made *Fandom Wank* users more comfortable alienating the objects of their analysis as “Other.” Dunlap and Wolf tentatively conclude that,

In studying the memetics of FW online discussions, distinct trends seem to point to an intellectualized fan community that improves the quality of discussion by aggressively attacking poor or weak arguments ...

Furthermore, as FW members attack those committing "wank" outside the community, they take some steps to organize their behavior to minimize internal squabbles, even going so far as to briefly educate their members on the proper use of language and logic in constructing arguments. (Dunlap and Wolf)

They point out that *Fandom Wank* is not an obvious text to consider as written by fan-academics because, “it is difficult for those operating within an academic institution to recognize fans-as-intellectuals because of biases toward what are 'good' and 'bad' fan

practices” (Dunlap and Wolf). Certain fan communities seem ripe for comparison with academic communities, but a site like *Fandom Wank*, the name of which even contains a colloquialism for masturbation, is a less obvious example of a community of fan-academics. Dunlap and Wolf warn against judging a site based simply upon the language it uses or the demographic of its users, asserting that the community's underlying practices are what determine whether or not it is a pseudo-academic community.

TV Tropes is not quite as crude as *Fandom Wank*, and it has as its purpose the production of a useful text about texts rather than the production of a text about texts about texts. It can, however, be seen as rather similar. TV Tropes editors, like *Fandom Wank* users, engage in self-conscious efforts to improve the quality of discourse and articles on the site. Illustration 3 shows part of a conversation among TV Tropes editors who are in the process of coining the phrase “sinkhole” in order to describe, condemn and remove instances of an unhelpful behavior on the site. As previously mentioned, this new term can be confusing to new users of the site, but it also serves a function: it identifies a specific and common problem on the site, making it easier for conscientious editors to identify and correct “sinkholes.”

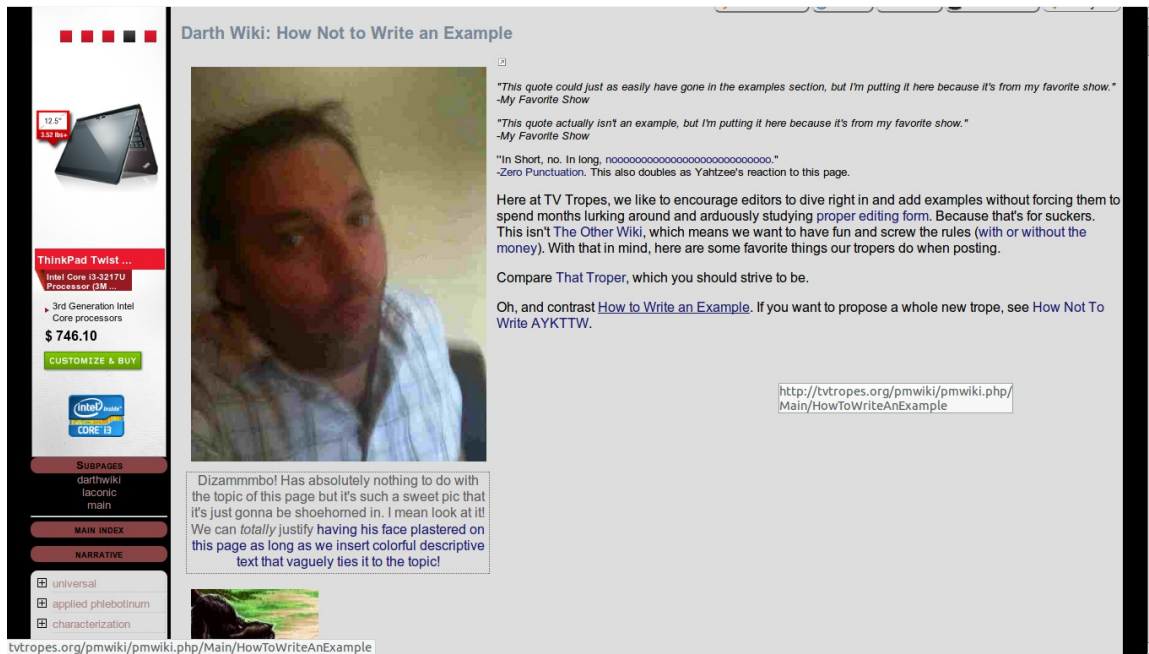


Illustration 4: *The "Darth Wiki" article, "How Not to Write an Example."*

There are many ways in which TV Tropes editors consciously encourage fellow editors to write according to established standards. For one thing, the standards of the site are widely available on pages such as "[How to Write an Example](#)" and "[Administrivia: TV Tropes Customs](#)." These pages serve as a list of the many rules and guidelines that might not be intuitively understood by new users. Veteran editors can point to these pages when explaining why certain information should go on one page rather than another, or why a certain writing style is inappropriate for the site. There are also more demonstrative pages, such as the page shown in Illustration 4, which is intended to serve as an example of all the worst tendencies of editors in creating and editing new pages. Pages such as this, which illustrate or describe what to avoid are

generally harsher but at times more useful than their counterparts. The TV Tropes page for the phrase, “[This Troper](#),” reads simply, “‘This Troper’, ‘this editor’, ‘I’, ‘me’—or any other form of referring to yourself in an article—is bad wiki writing. The article you are writing is for the reader. Leave yourself out of it. TV Tropes isn’t a forum or blog.”

(Anon, [This Troper](#)) The phrase “forum or blog” in the previous quotation “potholes” to the TV Tropes article about “[Natter](#),” which describes a related problem involving TV Tropes editors speaking in individual voices rather than the voice of the site.

The guidelines set forth in these articles apply completely to public parts of the site intended for casual readers, but some of them also have bearing over communication in the site's forums. Thus these articles, though they do direct the site's discourse, do not do so as perfect, strict rules. It's freely acknowledged among most TV Tropes editors that rules can be broken if there's a good reason for doing so or if it's on an informal part of the site. The guidelines for writing and editing on the site are tools for editors, established by their colleagues, and can be changed, done away with or enhanced at any time. The community demonstrates an active ownership over the parameters of their interaction.

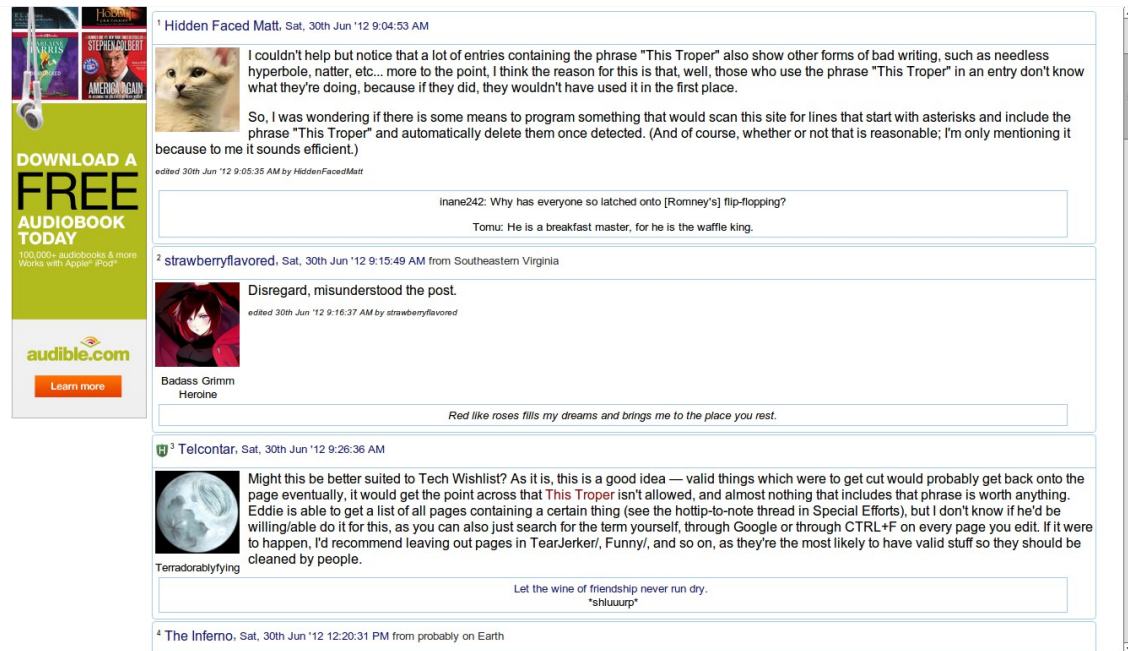


Illustration 5: *The beginning of a discussion about how to deal with the phrase "This Troper."*

For example, Illustration 5 shows the beginning of a discussion about possible ways of preventing the phrase “this troper” from showing up in public articles. One troper suggests that the site should have an automated feature which automatically deletes edits made which include the phrase “this troper.” The original poster suggests that pages containing the phrase “this troper” were probably made by an editor who does not fully understand the guidelines of TV Tropes and thus contain further errors. The phrase “this troper” is suggested as an indicator of poor writing in general, and this suggestion is well-received, although other TV Tropes editors suggest potential problems with using the phrase in this way; for example, certain parts of the site might operate more slowly if this program were in place.

**10 DAYS**

Subpages: [source](#) [log in](#) [history](#) [edit page](#) [related](#)

[Discussion](#) [Main](#) [Quotes](#) [Laconic](#) [Analysis](#)

## Just For Fun: Egregious

*"Professor Hogben... is unwilling to look 'egregious' up in the dictionary and see what it means."*  
— George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"

People keep using the word "egregious", which does not mean what they often think it means. According to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*:

- e-gre-gious** (/ˈɡrɛˌjəs/ IPA: /ˈɡrɪːdʒəs/ or /əˈɡrɪːdʒi.əs/) *adj.* 1 archaic : distinguished 2 : conspicuous; especially : conspicuously bad : flagrant <egregious errors>. Latin *egregius*, from *e-* + *greg-*, *grex* herd
  - e-gre-gious-ly** *adverb*
  - e-gre-gious-ness** *noun*

You'll see this word used often on [This Very Wiki](#). Repeatedly used, you could even say (and egregiously at that). It's almost as if people are looking for reasons to put it in, as if it were the trigger for some kind of pleasurable behavior. The word itself has become a somewhat [Discredited Meme](#), as more instances of its use are linked to this page than not. [Now drink up!](#)

Of course, the real reason is that people want to look *learnéd* on this site. So, instead of saying "This series is a particularly bad example in that...", you get "This series is particularly egregious in..." Alternatively, it's a way of [Getting Crap Past the Radar](#) — since calling a show "badly written" might spark an [Edit War](#), they use a word that is, strictly speaking, neutral, but has inescapable negative connotations.

A much less used word that seems to be the target of much egregious grasping is "gregarious", which means "social" or "sociable". If someone's talking about an "egregious person", this is what they were going for (unless they just don't like the guy). Oh, and "egregarious" is not the Internet equivalent of being sociable, it's not a word at all, [despite what some people seem to think](#).

**Waldorf:** People sure seem to like the word "egregious".  
**Stallor:** That's because it describes them!  
**Both:** Do-ho-ho-ho-ho!

|                    |                                         |                            |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Disney Theme Parks | More Like a Footnote than Anything Else | Fan-Speak                  |
| Earth              | Just for Fun                            | Essential Third Act Twists |
| Easter Egg         | Self-Demonstrating Article              | Either Or Title            |

**SUBPAGES**  
justforfun  
laconic  
main  
quotes

**MAIN INDEX**

**NARRATIVE**

**THE AVERAGE** [AdChoices](#)

*Illustration 6: The "Just For Fun" TV Tropes page describing the significance, to TV Tropes editors, of the word "egregious."*

TV Tropes editors also use language to establish their membership in the TV Tropes community, like users of *Fandom Wank*. The article entitled "[Drinking Game: TV Tropes Wiki](#)" serves as a partial list of in-jokes used by TV Tropes editors. These jokes are sometimes specific to certain interests on the site, but many refer to common experiences shared by editors. Some jokes refer to the annoyances caused by inexperienced editors, such as, "Take a sip every time a troper puts "enough said" rather than an actual context [when adding an example to a trope page]" (Anon, [Drinking Game: TV Tropes Wiki](#)). Some jokes refer to commonly misused or overused terms, or commonly mentioned shows. Other in-jokes are taken from other sites on the net.

One common in-joke is overuse of the term "egregious." The term is notoriously both over- and incorrectly-used, and a page was created to describe this overuse, both in

works of popular culture and on TV Tropes itself. The page, shown in Illustration 6, is described as a “Just For Fun” page: it's not used seriously in the criticism of works and serves the sole purpose of explaining both how a word is often misused and why TV Tropes editors find that misuse amusing.

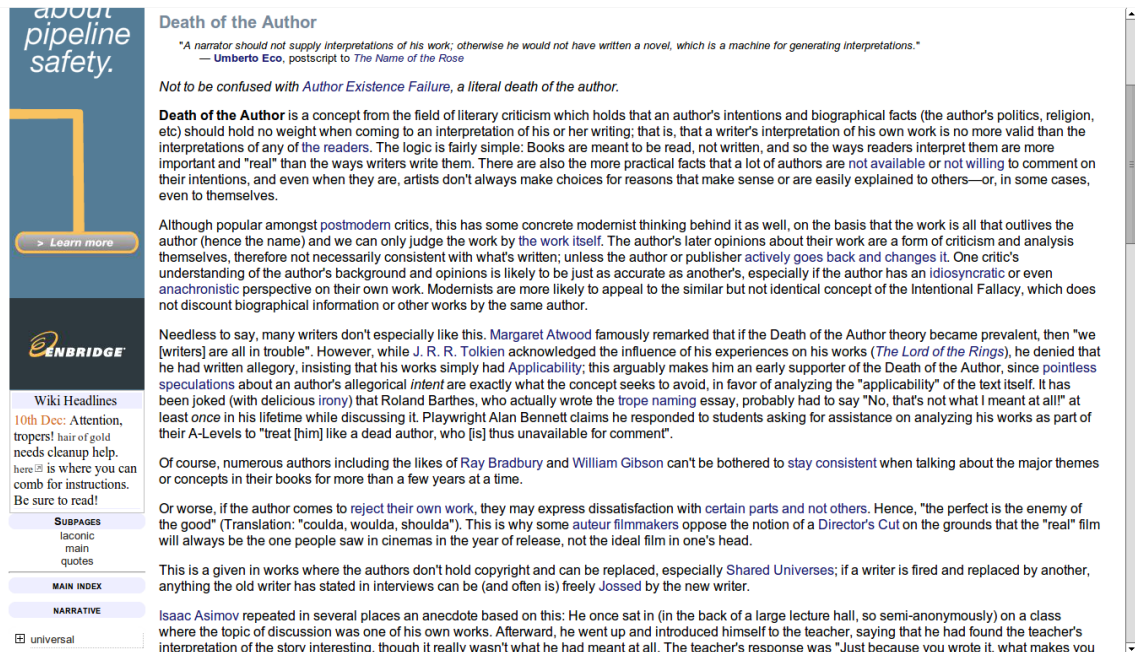


Illustration 7: [The TV Tropes page for the Death of the Author concept.](#)

TV Tropes, unlike *Fandom Wank*, sometimes engages academic ideas directly. A good example is the "[Death of the Author](#)" article, which describes the postmodern theory in simple but accurate terms, making it accessible to the average TV Tropes reader. This is one way in which TV Tropes goes beyond *Fandom Wank* in becoming a community of fan-academics; TV Tropes incorporates, engages and builds upon accepted literary theory, not merely becoming its own academic community with accepted customs and modes of speech, but also opening the door to engagement with the

wider academic community. Still, TV Tropes users don't just adopt academic ideas exactly as they are: just as Barthes suggests that an author's intentions and personal history are irrelevant in interpreting their work, so do TV Tropes editors use academic ideas in their own way, focusing on how they can use those ideas to create meaning for themselves rather than trying to understand exactly how they hold meaning for academics. (Barthes)

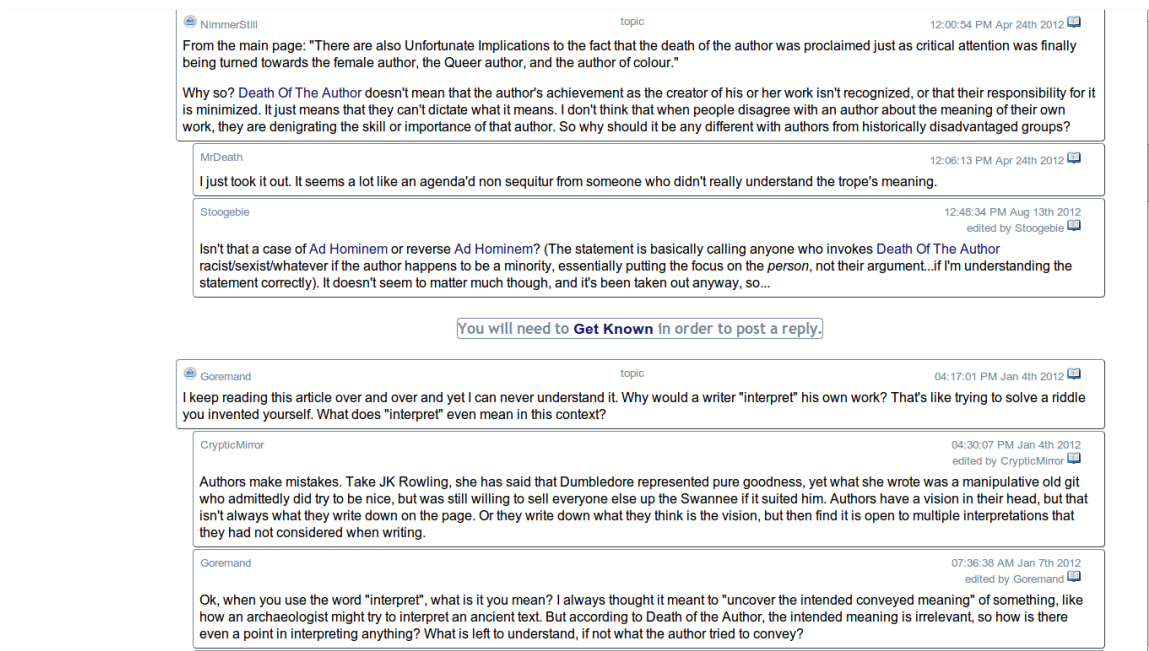


Illustration 8: *[TV Tropes editors' discussion about the Death of the Author article.](#)*

Illustration 8 shows two examples of engagement with academic ideas: this is one of several pages which inspire TV Tropes editors to discuss the ideas of academics. In the first interaction, users interrogate a statement made in the article and find it to be incorrect; they remove it, assuming that it was originally added by someone who doesn't understand the idea of the "Death of the Author." In doing so, they refine the definition

of “Death of the Author” provided to other editors of TV Tropes and establish that their own grasp of the concept is thorough. The second interaction shown in Illustration 8 is the beginning of a long conversation in which several users discuss the “Death of the Author” theory. Although they may not perfectly understand the theory, these TV Tropes editors are comfortable discussing it, and doing so does not feel out of place on TV Tropes.

TV Tropes editors are not academics and TV Tropes is not a traditional academic community, but there are many important similarities between TV Tropes and academic communities which must be acknowledged. TV Tropes fits Matt Hills' definition, has rules of engagement, and even at times directly engages scholarly texts. Because TV Tropes is a pseudo-academic community, it can not allow just anyone to contribute to the wiki text being created. Unlike a traditional academic text, however, such as a journal, there is no official barrier to participation. Absolutely anyone can join TV Tropes and participate. Participation is very limited, however, if one does not understand the language of TV Tropes. Suggestions made by a TV Tropes editor who is unfamiliar with the discourse of TV Tropes will be ignored or removed, and anyone unfamiliar with the discourse of TV Tropes will find it very difficult to fully understand what is being said on private parts of the site.

Thus it can be said that TV Tropes' specialized and occasionally confusing discourse serves as the barrier of participation which TV Tropes otherwise lacks. Although it functions primarily to help TV Tropes editors to communicate, the particular

language of TV Tropes editors also keeps those who have not taken the time to learn that language from editing the site in likely detrimental ways. In academic texts, such as a journals, contributions are simply not accepted if they do not meet the criteria of the community. TV Tropes, as a text written by fan-academics, also needs to prevent potential editors from changing the site for the worse. Rather than instituting clear-cut barriers for participation, however, TV Tropes editors trust its language to prevent undesirable changes from being made.

TV Tropes editors developed their specialized discourse organically, borrowing practices from other sites, using words that seemed right until they became commonly known, and occasionally engaging in self-conscious conversation about what words were needed and how to make them most effective. This discourse was naturally exclusionary, and because it had developed alongside the ideas and practices of TV Tropes, familiarity with TV Tropes' discourse is very closely associated with familiarity with the important rules and practices of TV Tropes as a site. TV Tropes is therefore able to operate as a pseudo-academic site because those who are not qualified to participate are easily identifiable. This is an example of a particular model of community construction which will likely be copied, intentionally and unintentionally, as communities and communication on the internet continue to change.

### Conclusion

TV Tropes users facilitate their own discussions by adopting and developing a unique discourse. This discourse also serves to exclude those potential users who have not taken the time to learn about the discourse and the site. The ways in which this discourse is used, and the topics discussed by TV Tropes editors, identify them as a pseudo-academic community, that is, a community of people who perform work which has many important similarities to the work of academics although they are not academics.

Fans and fan communities have long been understudied, and those who have studied them have not made the useful comparison between certain fan communities and academic communities. The desire to maintain academic objectivity has prevented academics from acknowledging the similarities between the work of fans and the work of academics. These similarities provide those who study fan communities with important ways to think about those communities and suggest, as Henry Jenkins begins to, that fan communities should be regarded as important sites of the construction of ideas, rather than simply as collections of passive consumers.

Understanding TV Tropes' and other communities' roles as pseudo-academics is an important part of more fully understanding how people consume and interact with media. Before we can claim to fully understand fan discourse and pseudo-academic communities, we must test these ideas more thoroughly, looking to different sites, such as Wikipedia, Reddit, and online learning communities supported by universities, as

possible sites of pseudo-academic production. The internet has changed how people produce online content, and in order to understand the role of academia in the digital age, we must understand the ways in which fans are beginning to adopt the role of the academic. Moreover, these pseudo-academic modes of production change the relationship among creator, creation, and consumer, with the consumer assuming a much more active role in deriving meaning from a text. In order to understand modern audiences, one must understand the ways in which they discuss and derive meaning from the texts they enjoy.

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