

PA/TROLLING THE BORDERS OF THE FEDERAL VAMPIRE AND ZOMBIE AGENCY WEBSITE: REALISM, GENDER, AUTHENTICITY¹

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This site is a tribute to the men and women who served in the FVZA [Federal Vampire and Zombie Agency] ... who lost their lives fighting to keep our country safe. In addition to paying tribute to the FVZA, this site hopes to call attention to dangerous research being done at the Santa Rosa Institute: research that runs the risk of bringing back a scourge of vampires worse than any before.²

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With this opening address, the Federal Vampire and Zombie Agency website presents a story set in an alternate reality. The website consists of a collection of official-looking documents, newspaper and magazine articles that recount the story of the agency. According to this alternative reality, FVZA is a quasi-military organization formed to combat vampire and zombie contagion in America. The vampire and zombie threats arrived in America with the first European settlers in the sixteenth century. The FVZA was set up in the nineteenth century, and thanks to their development of immunization and professional combat techniques and weaponry, the vampire and zombie threats were eradicated. By 1975 the FVZA was disbanded and Dr. Hugo Pecos, the director, pensioned off. However, Pecos believed that the vampire and zombie threats had not died, but merely gone to ground.

The website was produced in 2001 and, given FVZA's interest in combat, it is no great leap of the imagination to connect the threat of vampires and zombies with 9/11. Indeed Richard S. Dargan, the website creator, notes the aims of the website as, -partly an attempt to apply some logic to the undead ... [Partly] ... apocalyptic fears in the age of terrorism.¶³ In this statement lie two issues central to the website narrative: first, the link between 9/11, war and the apocalypse; second, in using the word -logic,¶ Dargan opts for a realistic representation of the undead. Indeed, realism is central to the knowledges and the hierarchies developed in the website and maintained principally by Dargan, his various alter egos of Dr. Hugo Pecos, Dangovich, and moderators in the website. The website also has a loyal participant base that defends it from attack by trolls, individuals who post inflammatory messages with the aim of destabilizing or subverting the website. These inflammatory posts are based upon values that challenge the realism of the website, and are discussed in the final section of the chapter.

In FVZA, the vampire is a human infected by a virus that -rewrites the victim's DNA,¶⁴ dehumanizing them. An understanding of the nature of the so-called viral vampire is crucial to subcultural authenticity, as noted in the opening page of Incident Reports in which Pecos asserts that, -learning to separate false reports from the genuine article is an important skill for an FVZA investigator.¶⁵ Facts are continuously invoked to reinforce the stories and documents posted on the website by Dargan and, in this sense, empirical knowledge operates to substantiate ideas. Much rhetoric on the website is predicated on the necessity of generating factual material that concurs with such viral vampire -facts.¶ In Pecos's seeded documents realism is reinforced by the recounting of vampire pathology, quoting from quasi-scientific reports, accounts of famous vampires, and outbreaks of the vampire virus in history, folktales and myths. These stories are reinvented to incorporate vampire elements in what we would half recognize as versions of -real¶ events. For instance, the website rewrites Valerie Solanas's attempted assassination of Andy Warhol as a vampire attack.⁶ There are also lists of famous vampires such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, Rasputin, and Ivan the Terrible. Participants submit incident reports, ask Pecos's opinions, get advice about possible sightings, and discuss the FVZA military and combat weaponry and combat techniques. In the RPG section, which was partitioned off from the forums in November 2003, weaponry,

combat strategies and missions are discussed. Role playing is discouraged in forums; the role-playing section maintains the emphasis on realism and prohibits superpowers or fantastic elements to creep into the missions.⁷

What makes FVZA so interesting in comparison with other vampire fandoms is the avowed masculinity, especially in the vampire section, of its rhetoric and participants. This masculinity sets FVZA apart from other contemporary vampire texts that tend to be targeted at female audiences. Authenticity and hierarchies in the website cluster around rhetoric based upon perceived traditional masculine discourses: realism and war. FVZA participants express masculine values in their forums and, so far as can be determined, are male⁸ in a subgenre that has become feminized.⁹ That it was produced in 2001 suggests a close connection with 9/11 and its avowedly masculine rhetoric, a masculinity that has been in crisis since 9/11. Susan Faludi,¹⁰ for instance, proposes that since the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century, America has developed a fear of invasion by –other|| peoples. 9/11 disrupted the American myth of invulnerability encapsulated in the frontiersman,¹¹ because it brought forth no masculine lone hero to inspire the collective imagination. Post 9/11, masculinity became defensive and psychologically disempowered, and there was a cultural reaction that reverted to traditional heteronormative masculinity. Given the rhetoric and the gendered issues that emerge from the FVZA website, Faludi’s proposal does seem convincing. For –other|| peoples, read vampires and zombies. It also poses the question: what pleasures do the fans of this masculine-orientated website gain from their participation in fan forums? Superficially, it is the opportunity for the mainly male participants to re-enact 9/11 so that this time we win. But my analysis demonstrates other pleasures gained by all participants within the FVZA forum. The first part of the chapter deals with gender, authenticity and hierarchies in researching fandom. To contextualize the analysis of the rhetoric in the latter part of the chapter, the discourses constructing the two types of vampire that appear on the website are deconstructed. The viral and sympathetic vampires play a key role in the generation of hierarchies. In defining what the FVZA vampire is not, participants define their own identities.¹²

Fandom, Gender and Authenticity

Much debate in academia on fan fiction and fandoms concentrates on female identities and hierarchies in subcultures. The first wave of fandom researchers aimed to differentiate the fan from common perceptions of the hysterical mob or the crazed loner. Consequently, writers such as Camille Bacon-Smith¹³ and Henry Jenkins¹⁴ showed the creative aspects of fandom and the liberation they afforded the disempowered, such as women. Later research used poststructural and sociological ideas to examine the operation of hierarchies within fandom. John Fiske¹⁵ and Sarah Thornton¹⁶ apply the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu¹⁷ to subcultures to demonstrate the presence of hierarchies and the concept of cultural capital, capital that is not necessarily economic but linked with the accumulation of communal credibility. Bourdieu notes that, –[T]aste classifies and it classifies the classifier.||¹⁸ Performance and articulation of communal values, and an understanding of cultural *habitus*,¹⁹ are central to the production of authenticity. Through knowledge and performance within a subculture, participants accumulate –subcultural capital.||²⁰ Subcultural capital is symbolic rather than literal, as it generates more respect within the community. The values and hierarchical structure therefore become interdependent and the values of a subculture may differ dramatically from those of the broader culture. This leads to an in/out dichotomy within fandom.

The exclusion of dissent in fandom is challenged by Abigail Derecho, who proposes that fan fiction is archontic, an archival activity that is inclusive, and the result of a –hive mind|| rather than one producer.²¹ Further, the archive is non-hierarchical: –archontic literature is inherently, structurally, a literature of the subordinate against cultures of the dominant.||²² Derecho’s argument enables fan fiction to be incorporated into the wider textual unity and

this is useful in this analysis of FVZA, which incorporates both the viral and the sympathetic vampire.²³ Nevertheless, although it may be inclusive, participants who construct the archive do so within hierarchical structures. Fan practices often reproduce hierarchies in society and textual boundaries and thus –perform a key strategy that allows fans to construct a self-reflexive reading of the object of fandom. It is a simultaneous process of inclusion and exclusion.²⁴ What I propose in this chapter is that participatory culture is inclusive, and that participants within fandom can gain pleasures within these hierarchies, whether they operate within or outside of the community.

The Viral Vampire, the Sympathetic Vampire and Gender

The vampire is constructed through gender and realism from its folkloric and literary roots. It is a powerful metaphor of otherness and paradox, representing desire, sexuality, and eternal youth and beauty, juxtaposed with monstrosity and disease within post-Romantic societies from the late eighteenth century. Although paradoxical, these issues are present in –the story itself [which] encodes some central belief or perception that is . . . more or less constant from the vampire’s very beginnings.²⁵ Vampirism is linked with hemophilia, blood disorders, rabies, and AIDS in folklore and early vampire novels.²⁶ Dracula, for instance, arrives on a plague ship from the borders of Europe and Asia, invoking the threat of racial contagion in *fin de siècle* England. He poses as human and insinuates himself into the heart of English society, subverting patriarchal order and sexual propriety, and inspiring desire in English middle class women. Whereas the vampire was regarded as a sexual and diseased monster in films, plays and novels up to the 1970s, a new breed of *angst*-ridden, feminized vampires emerged from the 1970s. The sympathetic vampire cycle resulted from the domestication of the vampire and its alignment with melodrama and romance. Key characters in the development of the sympathetic vampire are Louis in *Interview with the Vampire*,²⁷ Barnabus in *Dark Shadows*,²⁸ and Angel in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003),²⁹ vampires who deplore their blood-lust. Barnabus and Angel also form the basis for the crossover of the vampire from horror to the supernatural romance genre. The supernatural romance subgenre fuses the sympathetic vampire with his original inspirations, Lord Byron and Heathcliff, in texts such as *Twilight*³⁰ and *True Blood*.³¹ These narratives combine horror, romance and teen dramas, and their anti-heroes — Bill Compton and Edward Cullen — tend to appeal to female fans. FVZA, however, is unashamedly masculine in its conception and in its underpinning discourses.

FVZA vampires are unremittingly other, aligned with war narratives in video games and films rather than with literature. FVZA belongs to a subgenre of vampire, demon and zombie horror, in which the emphasis is on the slayers, acting within the context of military institutions in texts such as *Sanctuary*,³² *Resident Evil*,³³ and *Covert Vampire Organization (CVO)*.³⁴ Such narratives stress weapons and combative techniques, and construct vampires and zombies as abject, diseased, and inhuman. FVZA forms a part of war-related texts that since 9/11 have been predicated upon realism and traditional American values. Realism has –permeated nearly every aspect of contemporary life, finding pronounced expression in entertainment media.³⁵ War texts from 9/11 rely on realism as a tool for the rewriting of history and the validation of the fantasy within the real world.³⁶ Disease and contagion in this world become metaphors for invasion, not only of the human body but also the nation. The website likewise becomes a battleground to retain a sense of purity in the realistic vision of the vampire as a possible, not a supernatural, threat.

Realism in war narratives reinforces American nation building and expansion in the real world.³⁷ War games revise history. For instance, *Conflict: Desert Storm II: Back to Baghdad*³⁸ entices its mainly adolescent male audiences through realism, using documents such as documentaries, newspaper reports and news coverage. These types of war-based narratives are more masculine in their concept and enable their participants to experience war

within a risk-free environment.³⁹ They also give participants a measure of empowerment over future attacks. FVZA continuously reiterates its professionalism and expertise. Documents in the website, for instance, note:

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The tactics of the Federal Vampire and Zombie Agency used to fight the undead from 1868 to 1976 are just the thing the CIA needs to subdue America's new enemies, according to retired Maj. Gen. Mike Blois of Wilmington, North Carolina ... -This would be a different type of soldier ... he would be able to act independently with minimal or no oversight ... such an agent would have prevented the terrorist attacks of September 11.¶⁴⁰

<End Excerpting >

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Top American military brass confirmed yesterday they have been consulting with Dr. Hugo Pecos ... for help in locating Osama Bin Laden ... Dr. Pecos is confident that Bin Laden will eventually be found. -After all,¶ he noted, -vampires are much more formidable than terrorists, and we eradicated them.¶⁴¹

<End Excerpting>

Realism, Hierarchy and Authenticity

Authenticity on the website is constructed through spatial organization and the presentation of knowledge. There is no clear linear narrative of cause and effect in the website, rather, as Marie-Laure Ryan⁴² argues, the website narrative is non-linear, akin to a sea anemone where the participants click onto different pages then click back to the center. However, this act in itself implies a hierarchy, in which the homepage privileges the most important material on the site. So, too, do the regulations in the fan forums, which are placed separately at the top of the topic lists. Participants' understanding of viral vampires is crucial in their progression through the hierarchies of the website. A participant's accumulated posts provide them with respect within the community even if they breach the rules, as will be discussed below.

Participant authenticity has been noted in other subcultural research. Peter Donnelly and Kevin Young⁴³ propose four stages of progress within a sports subculture: pre-socialization, selection and recruitment, socialization, and acceptance/ostracism. The first three stages concern the actor's performance of a specific subcultural identity. Pre-socialization, for instance, refers to the ways in which new members, or neophytes, become aware of a subculture through family, friends, or the media: -such tenuous knowledge of a specific subculture frequently results in a caricatured and stereotypical image of the group, and certain misconceptions regarding members.¶ Selection and recruitment relate to the participant's introduction and enrolment into the subculture. The fourth stage concerns identity confirmation by the subculture, when the participant is -placed as a social object.¶⁴⁴

Although Donnelly and Young write about sports subcultures, their model for the production of hierarchies and authenticity on the FVZA website is highly appropriate.

The highest authority on the website is its producer, Richard S. Dargan, and his alter egos, Dr. Hugo Pecos and Dangovich the Unfrozen Caveman. The rules of the RPG forum state that -The highest authority in arguments [*sic*] ... is Dr. Hugo Pecos (aka Dangovich from the FVZA forum), he will have the final say in any and all arguments [*sic*].¶⁴⁵ After Dargan, the FVZA website hierarchies amongst participants are organized around military promotion according to numbers of posts. This arrangement is similar to the video game in the progression from one level to another. Karine Barzilai-Nahon⁴⁶ argues that forum gatekeepers can control the information traffic on a forum. Gatekeepers can control the content through deletion, blocking and manipulation. However, the role of gatekeeper is not without its paradoxes in FVZA, as will be discussed below. At the bottom of the hierarchy is the neophyte, who might begin with the position of -zombie chow¶ before working through rankings such as -Scourge of the Dead¶ for over 1000 posts, and choosing their own rank

after 1500 posts.⁴⁷ These roles are allocated by participants' allegiance to website values and also by their number of condoned posts. Trolls — individuals who sign up to the website to disrupt and cause conflict — can be classed as neophytes as they seldom last more than thirty posts, but they are usually very aware of site values and use them as a tool to cause maximum conflict (discussed below).

Despite the simplicity of the hierarchies there are paradoxes in website protocol. On the Vampires forum the gatekeeper, Vampyre13, is a self-confessed vampire, thus breaching his own rules and regulations: –NO RolePlayers (RPr's). If you post that your [*sic*] a 13th century Dracula wanna be or similar, several things will happen. Your post will be mercilessly mocked. You will be flamed.⁴⁸ Your post will be moved to the graveyard or deleted.⁴⁹ Despite this breaching of his own rules, he claims subcultural capital through knowledge, as noted by a participant: –he is the resident expert on this subject and Mod.⁵⁰ Vampyre13 is tolerated and respected within the community, seemingly successfully breaching the rules. Authenticity seems to be achieved through adherence to –facts and maturity/age. The latter issue is important because long-term participants have grown up and achieved their authenticity from 2001, so they have a stake in the website content but also have reached maturity within this period: –I'm not a pre-teen, sparkle eyed, youth full of Gen-Y (2000) bullshit in my head that then, spews onto this forum. Indeed, within the site, Vampyre13 is referred to as –the old man. He is also provided with a testimonial: –People believe in vampyre13 not because he shouts from the rooftops 'I am a vampire!' ... Ol vamp works his true character into his posts here ... over time your true colors shine through.

An example of hierarchies at work in the FVZA website can be found in a communication between Stinger 5 (with 309 posts) and Vampyre13. Stinger5 misreads the website values, a common failing of members new to a subculture when, in their enthusiasm for authenticity, they may –deliberately adopt mannerisms and attitudes ... speech, and behavior that [is perceived as] characteristic of established members of the achieved subculture.⁵¹ He remarks that the *30 Days of Night Vampire* is a better representation than vampires wearing trenchcoats and sunglasses: –I have started to become really annoyed with people who claim they are immortal vampires.⁵² Although the anti-RPG rhetoric seems to articulate the forum values, and Stinger5 has 309 posts, he is criticized by Vampyre13 who admits he is –a self-proclaimed vampire ... i do somewhat resemble ... Dracula. Stinger5 quickly backs down: –I'm sorry if it offended you ... This is my first –dip into the vampire part of the forum. I expected to make a mistake somewhere. And yes, I had heard that you had something resembling a vampire lifestyle, and I wasn't meaning to include you in the 'things that annoy me' list. What is significant in this encounter is that authenticity can be acquired by certain individuals in a subculture, but it has to be earned. Given the aggression shown to RPGs in the forum discussions, Stinger5's mistake is understandable. The accidental infringement of rules can be shown in a post, –Vampire Facts, where Fibonacci, a new participant, attempts to describe the symptoms of the vampire virus, including –Sudden darkening of hair: This virus changes the gene that determines hair color. This is challenged and demolished by three long-term participants for contradicting itself and for its lack of knowledge of –vampire facts. The last notes: –the [myths] you're talking about ALL COME FROM MOVIES! Movies aren't real. They don't even transfer into real life. They make a good story up and then toss it on a screen...It's no wonder no one believes you. It's very important when you're acting like a know it all jerk that you DON'T contradict yourself. Cause now you look like an idiot. The continuous assertion that viral vampires are not constructed through media myths is used across the website in forums and the seeded documents (see below).

Rhetoric and Authenticity: Defining Monstrosity

In this section rhetoric is discussed through two types of participant activity, definition and combat. In both sections gender and hierarchies play a major role. Website rhetoric indicates

a macho culture in its attitude towards vampires and in their definition. Authenticity clusters around issues of audiences, genre, and, obliquely, gender. Definition is in the comparison of various vampire presentations. Combat is metaphorical and takes place on forum discussions between FVZA agents and trolls. The comparative and combative aspects of rhetoric are definitional. They define participants' values and the authenticities underpinning FVZA. Vampires that bear similarity to the viral vampire or the realistic, masculine values of the FVZA website have more approval than the sympathetic vampires of *Twilight*.

Generically, as noted above, FVZA falls under the war/combat genre linked with films and video games. In contrast, the sympathetic vampire genre is linked with romance and melodrama, both associated with women and therefore tending to be dismissed as culturally credulous. Literary-based texts, such as *Twilight*, *Interview with the Vampire* and *Vampire Diaries*, are subject to vitriolic attack, with participants particularly scornful of –god-moddedll vampires and homoerotic, –girly monstersll in *Interview with the Vampire*. The issues emerging from these quotations define the audiences who are devotees of the sympathetic vampire as immature and female. The crossover of vampires from horror to romance/melodrama is regarded as weakening a previously virile monster. Participants define themselves against female audiences, and the viral vampire encapsulates this difference, as shown in the following quotations:

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I blame Anne Rice and her ilk, they cut the balls off a horror staple and turned him into a brooding angst-ridden loser in a frilly shirt. (Judge Khan)

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... [*Twilight* fans are] young and stupid. (Vampyre13)

<End Excerpting>

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... IT'S ALL about teenage angst and emo bullshit with some steamy sex scenes
... Vampire books and the genre itself has gone from the Horror section in the book stores to the Young Readers area ... the only Vampire novels worth reading are all STILL in the horror section, though it depends greatly on your bookstore
... (The Dark One)

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... couldnt get thru the first book [*Twilight* saga] ... to the part where the girls in school boooooooring ... saw the flick ... way too teenboppish ... Stoker would be rolling over in his grave. (Vampyre 13)

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Comments about Stoker –rolling in his gravell indicate the subcultural credibility of *Dracula*, born out in other forum discussions about *Dracula* and *30 Days of Night* above. Both texts are approved of for perceived heteronormative masculine values: violence, predatory sexuality, and objectivity.

Of film vampires FVZA participants approve of Christopher Lee's portrayal of Dracula who:

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... was especially evil because he brought sexual pleasure to the women. This is one of the things that the Hammer Dracula films got right. In most of them, they show that the female victims took great pleasure in Dracula's embraces, even as it killed them. (Vampyre13)

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Dracula was a brooding sort in a frilly shirt but he brooded about more practical things and wasn't gay and in love with other vampires. (Ricky Strange)

<End Excerpting>

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... real vamps DO NOT CARE about sex, love, emotions ... there IS NO ROOM for that in their existence. Vampyre 13)

<End Excerpting>

30 Days of Night has the approval of the FVZA participants because it depicts vampires as unknowable, evil and animalistic. According to Nightstalker, the vampire is –a ruthless, killing machine, hell bent on making itself the only species on the planet.¶ Dr. Bedlam also attests to the authenticity of *30 Days Of Night*: –both the movie and the graphic novel brought us back to a vampire I could respect: a creature that may once have been human, but has been turned into a hideous monster ...¶

Pa/trolling the Boundaries: Symbolic Skirmishes in Cyberspace

In the comparisons above, FVZA participants construct their own identities from their concept of the viral vampire against the sympathetic vampire. Although most participants perform in compliance with FVZA values, there are some participants whose intervention in the site challenges FVZA agents. Trolls post contentious messages with the aim of eliciting violent responses. In encounters with these individuals, FVZA participants perform and confirm their subcultural identities, reflecting masculinized and idealized identities within the FVZA hierarchy.

Trolls, like other members of online communities, fabricate a range of identities which are used as avatars in different communal contexts.⁵³ Although the troll may seem a negative phenomenon, like the comparative rhetoric above, they serve to consolidate FVZA boundaries.⁵⁴ This is demonstrated in encounters with trolls.

In recent years FVZA interaction has diminished to a small number of hard core participants patrolling the site and shooting down any trolls claiming to be real vampires. In this sense they are acting out the FVZA narrative metaphorically, as they protect their space from predation by sympathetic vampires.⁵⁵ There are three levels of symbolic combat incorporated within the encounters between agents and trolls, and these relate to the viral versus sympathetic vampire: the vampire as virus attacking the body; the vampire as virus attacking the website; and the vampire as terrorist/suicide bomber, attacking America. Trolls purposely register and inflame in order to be abused and ultimately killed. But their activity is an important component in the reinvigoration of participation, for they often enact (sympathetic) vampire identities. FVZA agents regard them as young –twi-hards,¶ and often two or three will take part in an online skirmish to rout the pests.

Trollers relentlessly pursue conflict and confrontation unthinkable in the real world. In the –real world,¶ social etiquette is the province of the middle classes and tends to be conceptually female and constructed through nineteenth-century social discourses.⁵⁶ This courtesy is manifest in social intercourse, in which women defer to men in conversation and floorspace.⁵⁷ In her discussion of female online fandom, Rhiannon Bury defines verbal aggression as masculine and, invoking Herring’s study of online politeness, argues that –women are more concerned with maintaining positive politeness.¶⁵⁸ As noted above, the website is divided along two separate lines, role playing games (RPGs) and discussion forums. Despite the warning against role playing, there is regular flamebaiting (posts meant to inflame argument) by roleplayers.⁵⁹ As –[the virtual world] is composed of *information* rather than matter,¶⁶⁰ this type of behavior is an attack on fundamental social interaction and communities. Flamebaiting is often posted by trolls using a variety of usernames to escape detection. Trolls attempt to disrupt the flow of information within the virtual world, and because identities on the Internet are anonymous and multiple, trollers and virtual combatants⁶¹ do not face the social stigma of everyday life in their aggressive confrontations.⁶² What is significant about FVZA trollers is that some of them are female.

The behavior of participants in these online verbal combat encounters seem to overturn accepted norms of male/female behavior in Jenkins's fandom research, and in Derecho's perception of the libratory aspects of archontic texts.

One such encounter between FVZA agents and three troll identities is examined, to show how the realism of the archive discourse is used as a weapon on both sides. -I am a Vampire⁶³ is the first post by a role player, Iwillnotsuckyourblood, AKA Poppy, February 15, 2010. This is countered by four long-term participants and the forum moderator, Vampyre13. Poppy perhaps uses other identities, for once she disappears two more trolls, DarkLady and Caine, join the fray. The following discussion identifies the strategies in this online skirmish to show how realism and gender are key rhetorical issues.

Iwillnotsuckyourblood's opening address uses FVZA values as a weapon to attack the forum, in an opening phrase similar to Pecos's opening address: -i [sic] just want to set you straight with *the difference between myths and facts* ... if you delete this post or block me you are denying many people the *truth*.|| There is initial skepticism and she is challenged by Vampyre13, who demands facts, including:

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How often do you feed on bodily fluids? ... Are you associated with any known (or unknown) groups, covens, associations that would be recognized by the vampire community? 6. Are you aware of any specific vampire community organizations? 7. Are you goth, emo, dark natured, etc ? ... Finally, What evidence or proof do you possess to back your claim to vampiredom?

<End Excerpting>

The post raises discussion of identity through subcultural affiliation (emos and Goths, both regarded as inauthentic), age, and gender. Poppy responds, -www.vampirewebsite.net/forum is the only organization that i trust via internet ... im not a emo/goth/darknatured person, but most of my doners are emos.|| The use of -donors|| rather than -victims|| proclaims her sympathetic nature. Iwillnotsuckyourblood's profile is also questioned. Vampyre13 describes her as a poser and there is evidence that he knows of her previous activities on other websites: an -initial analysis (estimate really) puts you in the general percentile of a young adult or thereabouts, having been on previous forums and annoying the authorities there ... (hence post deletes). Offhand, I'd [sic] give you a 30% chance of sticking around here more than 60 days.|| Panther, a new recruit, takes up the attack, claiming, -you were banned for being a poser on the <http://vampirewebsite.net/forum> which ironically is the same website that you claim to get your information from.|| Panther can claim subcultural capital because of his knowledge of and activities on other vampire websites:

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Roughly mid to late 2009, poppy kept coming back with different ip#s [sic] by use of proxy sites for a while after that. On my forum when we IP ban we don't ban their name immediately, that way we know if they are back on a new IP ... Poppy kept coming back with a new proxy site about 15 times before I got sick of it and simply banned by name ...

<End Excerpting>

A day after Poppy's last post a new member, Lady Night, registers, claiming to hail from Sweden and to be over 30,000 years old. Again Vampyre13 demands facts, displaying knowledge of antiquity and history before blocking her content. Whether Poppy, Lady Night and Caine are the same individual and whether that individual is female cannot be verified.⁶⁴ However, the discussion of their encounters with FVZA participants confirms notions of online participation and online fabricated identities as libratory.⁶⁵

Trolls may gain some pleasure from these encounters, but the participants on the website also relish these attacks as they sharpen their discussion skills. More importantly, they keep the website functioning, as Vampyre13 comments: -without them certain sections on here

would go inactive. Jenkins notes that participatory culture enables deviant behavior as a form of transgression and resistance. He relates this to the producer/fan, or mass media/fandom relationships. However, FVZA begins as a website — part of the gift economy produced by a fan for fans. The encounters discussed above demonstrate that trolling and online debates construct their own hierarchies. Resistance may not be against the values of the website so much as a form of identity construction or affirmation.

Conclusions

Unlike many contemporary vampire fandoms, the FVZA website is constructed through discourses relating to realism and masculinity. Fantasy is discounted, romance is scorned and devalued. The rhetoric of participants, therefore, departs from previous studies of website rhetoric predicated upon narratives relating to fantasy, romance and melodrama in hurt/comfort, Mary Sue and slash fictions. Participants, however, define their alternate reality through the negative —not Ill in their comparison of FVZA vampires with sympathetic vampires. The use of realism to underpin FVZA rhetoric raises issues of gender and identity within the community. The construction of the archive — its practices and use of rhetoric — is similar to that of academia. It involves the employment of knowledge, facts, and rational debate to construct hierarchies and authenticity within the community. The close encounters and endless debate about the nature of vampirism suggest that the FVZA archive also includes those oppositional vampire texts through which the community can define itself.

The relationship between producer, participants and texts changes through convergence culture. Research into fan fiction websites has highlighted that fan fiction can be a liberating genre that gives voice to the silenced or disempowered. This chapter has focused on a masculine-based community, so one might conjecture that participants articulate within patriarchal systems from a position of power. Certainly their aggressive rhetoric in flaming, mocking, and reasoning against trolls — and the use of perceived essentialist masculine discourses, such as realism, logic, and war — seems to suggest this. However, the site is based on a call for action and the reassertion of masculine values. FVZA agents do gain satisfaction from their trollish combat. The FVZA archive incorporates these rhetorical encounters within the overall body and, just as male participants gain satisfaction from this combat, so too must the trolls — or else why flamebait? So the combative rhetoric is satisfactory for both parties. Another benefit of trollish behavior is that, in discussing FVZA with trolls, participants identify the boundaries of their alternate world.⁶⁶

What is certain in FVZA rhetoric in a post 9/11 cultural landscape is a picture of national and masculine uncertainty. In this landscape the viral vampire can be regarded as a disease threatening the national body. War games, as Richard C. King and David J. Leonard suggest, use realism to expand American frontiers. However, realism can also act as a tool for combating the irrational. Calls for FVZA professionalism to be applied to the militia and intelligence services act as a critique of the American administration's handling of the War on Terror, but also serve as an affirmation of the possible reinvigoration of American masculinity, with professionalism at the fore. The lack of confidence may change in light of recent events. As this chapter was being prepared, the death of Osama bin Laden, as the culmination of a meticulously planned and executed CIA initiative, was announced. From early reports of rejoicing at Ground Zero, it looks as though the American psyche and honor has been restored. It would be interesting to follow FVZA in these circumstances, to identify any reinvigoration of the site or new directions of narrative; for fan fiction, like the archive, is always a work in progress.⁶⁷

Notes

¹ Grateful thanks to David Huxley and Hugo Pecos for their generous help and excellent advice in writing this chapter.

² -FVZA: The Federal Vampire and Zombie Agency, || <http://www.fvza.org> (accessed September 20, 2010).

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- ³ Richard S. Dargan, —Foreword, in *FVZA: Federal Vampire and Zombie Agency*, by David Hine (writer) and Roy Allan Martinez (artist), (California: Radical Publishing, 2010), 6.
- ⁴ Joan Ormrod, e-mail message to Richard S. Dargan/Hugo Pecos, December 21, 2010.
- ⁵ Richard S. Dargan, —FVZA: Incident Reports, in <http://www.fvza.org/incidents.html> (accessed September 20, 2010).
- ⁶ Richard S. Dargan, —FVZA: Famous Cases: Terror in the Factory, in <http://www.fvza.org/warhol.html> (accessed September 20, 2010).
- ⁷ The RPG section rules posted by Adminbot3000, December 27, 2005, include: —[No] Magic, Satanic rituals that revive things that’ve been dead for a long time, Demons, Religious favoritism [*sic*]. By that I mean that God shall not smite vampires in this RPG, Ghosts, Extraterrestrials, Bigfoot, Bioenhancements that do not currently exist. You can have contact lenses, but no cybernetic arms with rocket launchers, Supersoldier FVZA agents, Superheros [*sic*]. Although I do like Spider-Man, I don’t want to read about him killing zombies unless it’s in comic book form by Marvel. Unrealistic actions, such as continents spontaneously [*sic*] combusting. Your character has to learn his/her skills from somewhere. You don’t just inherit those skills from family members. They can teach you those skills, but their blood/DNA won’t give you those skills for nothing. in http://z14.invisionfree.com/FVZA_RPG/index.php?showtopic=6 (accessed December 24, 2010).
- ⁸ Personal correspondence with Richard S. Dargan (April 15, 2011) confirms that vampire participants on the website tend to be male, and that there is a bigger female contingent in the zombie section.
- ⁹ Karen Backstein, —(Un)safe Sex: Romancing the Vampire, in *Cineaste* 35, no. 1 (2009): 38–41.
- ¹⁰ Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post 9/11 America* (London: Atlantic, 2008), 13–15.
- ¹¹ Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 33–48.
- ¹² Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), 9–13.
- ¹³ Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).
- ¹⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).
- ¹⁵ John Fiske, —The Cultural Economy of Fandom, in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 30–49.
- ¹⁶ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996).
- ¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).
- ¹⁸ Bourdieu, 6.
- ¹⁹ Habitus is a term used by Bourdieu to describe the lifestyle and background of an individual which, in turn, defines their taste and knowledge.
- ²⁰ Thornton, 11.
- ²¹ Abigail Derecho, —Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction, in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 64–66.
- ²² Derecho, 73.
- ²³ The graphic novel adaptation by David Hine for Radical Comics would also be an appropriate part of the archive to analyze, but there is no space to do this in this chapter. However, FVZA poses an interesting problem for the adapter, because apart from Pecos, no hero or heroine is presented on the website.
- ²⁴ Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005), 131.
- ²⁵ Bruce A. McClelland, *Slayers and Their Vampires: A Cultural History of Killing the Dead* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 17.
- ²⁶ Nicola Nixon, —When Hollywood Sucks, or, Hungry Girls, Lost Boys, and Vampirism in the Age of Reagan, in *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 115–128.
- ²⁷ Anne Rice, *Interview with the Vampire* (London: Warner, 1994).
- ²⁸ *Dark Shadows*, DVD, dir. Dan Curtis (US and Canada: MGM, 2009).
- ²⁹ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, DVD, Joss Whedon (UK: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007).
- ³⁰ Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (London: Atom, 2007).
- ³¹ *True Blood*, DVD, directed by various (US: HBO, 2010).
- ³² *Sanctuary*, DVD, dir. Martin Wood (UK: Contender Home Entertainment, 2007).
- ³³ *Resident Evil*, Playstation video game, dir. Shinji Makami (Japan: Capcom, 1996).

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- ³⁴ Alex Garner, Jeff Mariotte, Mindy Lee, and Gabriel Hernandez. *Covert Vampire Organization (CVO)* (US: IDW Publishing, 2004).
- ³⁵ Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne, -Introduction, in *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games*, ed. Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 10.
- ³⁶ This replicates the construction of *Dracula* which, according to McClelland, relies upon letters, diaries and newspaper articles for much of the narrative. Stoker does not draw attention through narration to Dracula's evil. Rather, he presents the reader with the information to enable them to make up their minds.
- ³⁷ Richard C. King and David J. Leonard, -Wargames as a New Frontier: Securing American Empire in Virtual Space, in *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games*, ed. Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne (New York and London: Routledge: 2010), 91-105.
- ³⁸ *Conflict: Desert Storm II: Back to Baghdad*. Video game, developer Pivotal Games (US; SCi, Gotham Games, 2003). Another example is in the development of the video game *Deadspace*, of which Ian Milham (the art director) noted, -The key I think was to not look at other games and movies too much, but instead look at real life ... and we integrated those real-world influences into the game. Brad Nicholson, -Dead Space's Horror Influence Comes from Life, Not Space Monsters, *Gamezone*, <http://www.destructoid.com/dead-space-s-horror-influence-comes-from-life-not-space-monsters-103619.phtml> (accessed April 4, 2011).
- ³⁹ King and Leonard, 92.
- ⁴⁰ FVZA, <http://www.fvza.org/prgeneral.html> (accessed February 4, 2011).
- ⁴¹ Ibid. -Legendary Vampire Hunter Helping in Search for Bin Laden, <http://www.fvza.org/prcaves.html> (accessed February 4, 2011).
- ⁴² Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, Electronic Mediations (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 97-125.
- ⁴³ Peter Donnelly and Kevin Young, -The Construction and Confirmation of Identity in Sport Subcultures, in *Contemporary Issues in the Sociology of Sport*, ed. Andrew Yiannakis and Merrill J. Melnick (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2001), 399-412.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 226.
- ⁴⁵ FVZA, -Rules of the FVZA RPG, posted by Adminbot3000, November 16, 2005. http://z14.invisionfree.com/FVZA_RPG/index.php?showtopic=2.
- ⁴⁶ Karine Barzilai-Nahon, -Gatekeeping: A Critical Review, *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* 34, no. 1 (2009): 1-79.
- ⁴⁷ Prophet, August 21, 2010, notes: -At 1500 posts, you can choose your own title under your name, in -I am a vampirell forum thread.
- ⁴⁸ The virtual demolition of an opponent through mockery, insults and invective.
- ⁴⁹ Vampyre 13, -Forum Index: Vampires, *The Federal Vampire and Zombie Agency*, October 5, 2008. <http://www.fvza.org/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=6467>.
- ⁵⁰ Oturbo, -I am a Vampire, <http://www.fvza.org/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=9830&sid=3f9759b310abac4bbf61db88f66c1b29> (accessed April 20, 2011).
- ⁵¹ Donnelly and Young, 225.
- ⁵² Stinger5, in -30 Days of Night ... more like the FVZA vampire? forum thread, September 6, 2008 (accessed April 20, 2011).
- ⁵³ See, for example, Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), and Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).
- ⁵⁴ Michele Tepper, -Usenet Communities and the Cultural Politics of Information, in *Internet Culture*, ed. David Porter (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 43. See also Judith S. Donath, -Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community, in *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (London: Routledge, 1999).
- ⁵⁵ This is noted by a newer member, Ihopdemon: -Currently, it seems like there are about 20-30 of us or so that talk mostly in the guns section ... It seems like nothing but role players and trolls have joined since I got here and are mostly chased away. FVZA, -What was the forum like in the beginning? <http://www.fvza.org/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=10136> (accessed May 2, 2011).
- ⁵⁶ Rhiannon Bury, *Cyberspaces of their Own: Female Fandoms Online*, Digital Formations Vol. 25 (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 131-35.
- ⁵⁷ Robin Tolmach Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), and Janet Holmes, *Women, Men and Politeness*, Real Language Series (London and New York: Longman, 1995).
- ⁵⁸ Bury, 135.
- ⁵⁹ Donath, 28.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Mark Dery, —Flame Wars, in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 1–10; and Howard Rheingold, —A Slice of Life in My Virtual Community, in *Global Networks: Computers and International Communication*, ed. Linda M. Harasim (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 57–80.

⁶² Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1990).

⁶³ FVZA, —I am a vampire I will not suck your blood, <http://www.fvza.org/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=9830> (accessed April 19, 2011).

⁶⁴ I attempted to contact them through email but received no reply. However, research into troll motivations would be interesting, especially when identifying the pleasures of this type of activity.

⁶⁵ Nakamura, 13.

⁶⁶ This can also be likened to academia's endless collection, classification and discussion of research. Indeed the connection to fan and academic participation has been noted by Joli Jenson, —Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization, in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁶⁷ Hellekson and Busse, —Introduction: Work in Progress.