

Squeeing, Flailing, and the “Post-Jared-and-Jensen Glow”:
An Ethnography of Creation Entertainment’s March 2009
“Salute to *Supernatural*” Conventions

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I. Introduction: When Fandom and Academia Collide

My first encounter with the CW television series *Supernatural* was in July of 2006. The series was on hiatus for the summer, so the network¹ was airing repeats of the first season episodes. At the time, I was a frequent poster on the Television Without Pity website forums² and was greatly enjoying the “My Motivation Is This...” thread, in which users made motivational posters with television characters and themes. Frequently, users would post screencaps³ of a black 1967 Chevrolet Impala and two exceptionally good-looking young men, one of whom was often shown clad only in a towel.⁴ After a few weeks, I said to myself, “Man, those boys are hot. Why do I not watch this show?” I looked up the time and date of the next rerun and tuned in. I fell in love with the show about two minutes into that first episode (1.12 “Faith”) and have been hooked on *Supernatural* ever since.

Supernatural, now in its fourth season, is a horror/suspense/action/drama series in which two brothers fight supernatural creatures, spirits, and demons while road tripping across the lower 48 states. *Supernatural* has a vast and supremely devoted fandom; *Supernatural* fans are loyal, obsessive, determined, enthusiastic, and evangelical. Personally, I’ve introduced seven people to the show since the fall of 2006 and three of them still routinely watch it with me on Thursday nights. *Supernatural* has inspired hundreds of thousands of fan fiction⁵ stories, digital

¹ At that time, the network was known as the WB; it would merge with the fledgling UPN network to create the CW in the fall of 2006. *Supernatural* was one of the ten WB series that survived the merger.

² <http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com>

³ “Screen captures”, or still shots taken from video.

⁴ See <http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?s=&showtopic=3142036&view=findpost&p=5484241>.

⁵ From Wikipedia: “fan fiction is a broadly-defined term for stories about characters or settings written by fans of the original work, rather than by the original creator. Works of fan fiction are rarely commissioned or authorized by the original work’s owner, creator, or publisher.... Fan fiction, therefore, is defined by being both related to its subject’s canonical fictional universe while simultaneously existing outside that universe.”

art projects, fan-made music videos, blogs, Web sites and Web forums. In my free time I have produced three music videos, ten complete fan fiction stories and four work-in-progress drafts. I would say I spend at least ten hours a week engaged in some sort of fannish activity related to the series.

As a *Supernatural* fan, I was aware of the “official” conventions (henceforth *cons*) at which the actors from the show appeared to interact with fans. After a weekend con, blog reports, pictures, and videos would appear on the fan websites I frequented, documenting the actors’ on-stage antics. I rarely paid attention to the con reports unless they were from my immediate fandom friends, as it was not a world I was terribly interested in. There is a large segment of fandom that writes fan fiction about the *actors* rather than their characters; this is known as real person fic (RPF), or real person slash (RPS) when the male characters are paired romantically. I felt that RPS was morally wrong,⁶ so I did not read or write it. Therefore, I had little interest in what the actors had to say about themselves and their lives. However, I started researching *Supernatural* RPS for an academic assignment last fall and “saw the light,” as it were. I began reading *Supernatural* RPS for fun and last week I wrote my first RPS vignettes for a themed writing game on LiveJournal.com. Around the same time, I found out about the ethnography course and I had the idea to attend a *Supernatural* con for my ethnography.

I made the arrangements to attend the Los Angeles, CA event on March 27-29 back in October 2008. I was unable to purchase the ticket that I wanted, however, so when the Cherry Hill, NJ event was announced a month later, I jumped at the chance to attend that con on March

⁶ Mostly because I felt it was an invasion of privacy as well as a denigration of the actor’s humanity and worth as a person. RPS usually ignores the actors’ real-life romantic relationships, yet incorporates the actors’ family members and friends, sometimes to an almost stalker-ish degree. I would be willing to wager that some RPS authors know more about the actors’ families than their own.

6-8 as well. The circumstance turned out to be quite fortuitous, as the two experiences varied quite a bit. The question I wanted to answer by attending the two conventions was, “What do fans do at conventions and why?”

II. Creation Entertainment: Making Dreams Come True, One Fangirl at a Time

Creation Entertainment was founded in 1971 by Adam Malin and Gary Berman, both of whom are still very active at the company’s events. Creation holds licenses to create souvenirs and collectibles such as t-shirts, coffee mugs, posters and film stills for several popular sci-fi/fantasy franchises. In addition to *Supernatural*, Creation holds conventions for *Star Trek*, *Stargate*, and now *Twilight* (Creation Entertainment 2004). Creation will hold two more *Supernatural* cons in 2009, one in Chicago in November and one in Vancouver in August.

At the *Supernatural* cons, there are five levels of ticketing. The best tickets are the Gold Weekend packages, which are the most expensive. Ticket prices vary based on geographical location and prestige level of confirmed guests.⁷ My Gold ticket for Cherry Hill was \$359; Gold tickets for LA were about \$125 more. Gold tickets for the March cons included:

- A reserved⁸ seat in the first 12 rows of seating
- One autograph from each guest
- Admission to the dessert party (Saturday night)
- Admission to the concert (Friday night [NJ], Saturday night [LA])
- Admission to the breakfast (Sunday morning)
- Lanyard and tote bag

⁷ Meaning, LA cost more because of the higher costs associated with the city as well as the fact that both main actors from the show were confirmed guests. Cherry Hill had only one of the main actors confirmed when tickets went on sale.

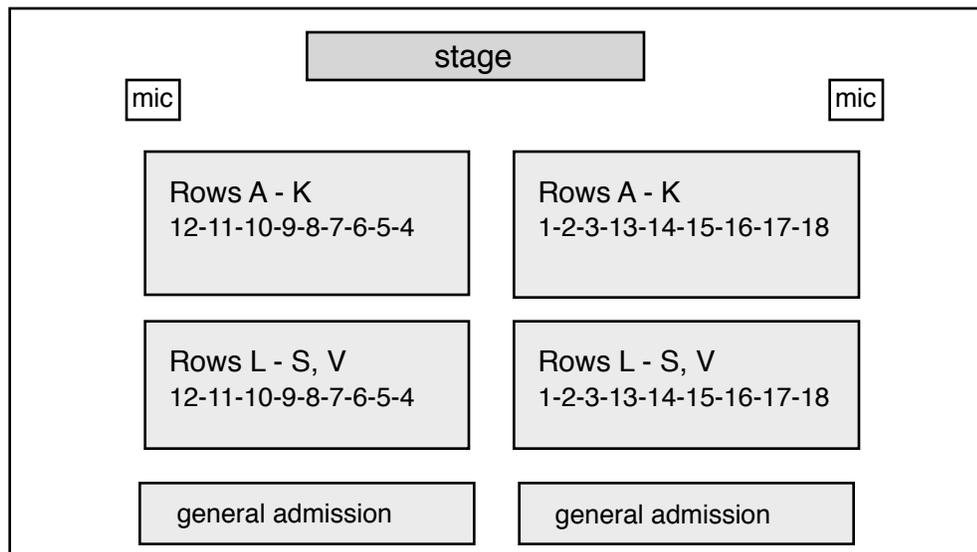
⁸ “Reserved” means that the seat assigned with your ticket (ex. A8) is yours for every event that takes place in the theater.

The next best ticket is the Silver Weekend package. My Silver ticket for LA was \$279; I believe Silver tickets for Cherry Hill were cheaper. Silver tickets for the March cons included:

- A reserved seat behind the Gold seats
- One autograph from each guest

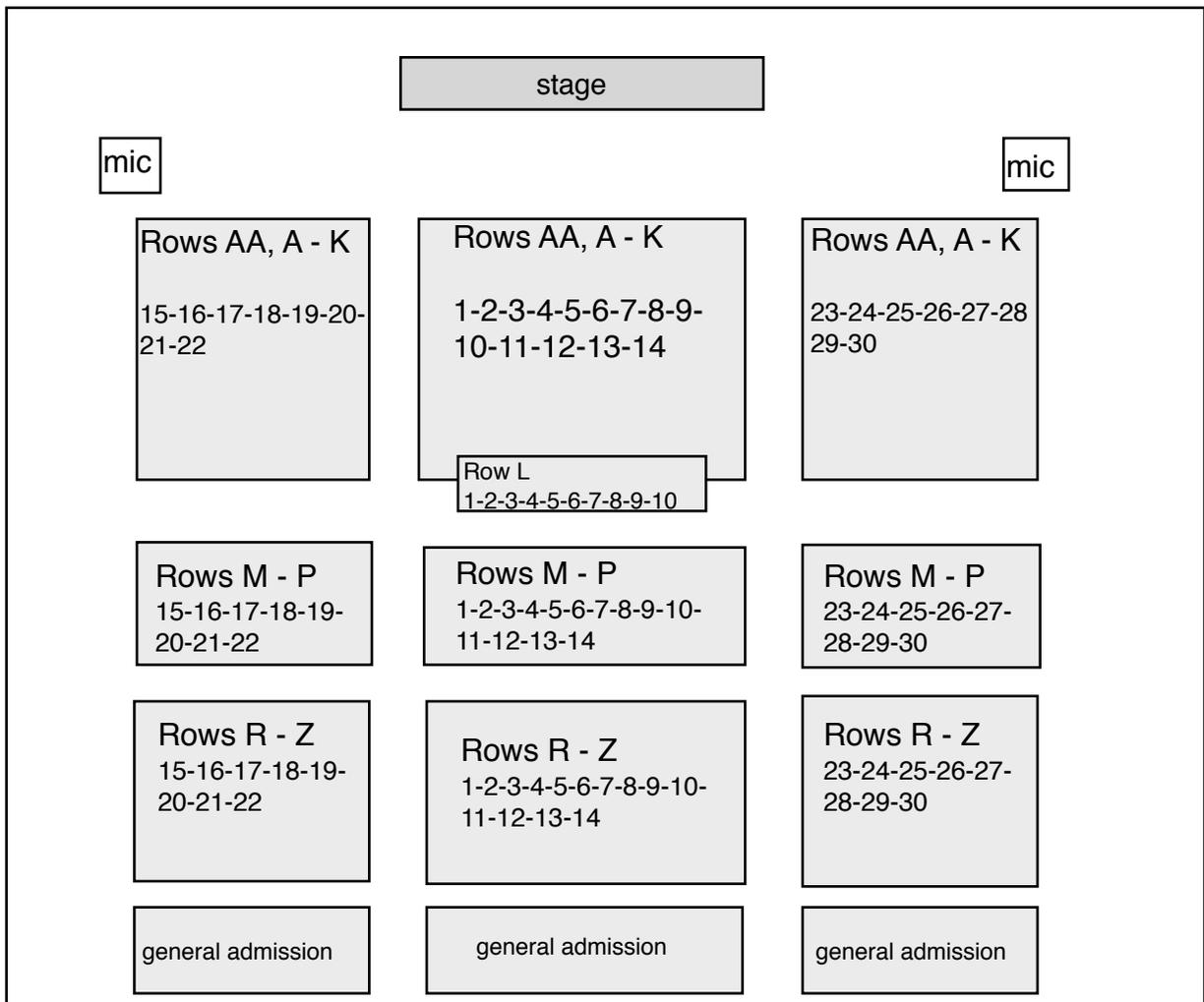
The next three levels of tickets are for seating only. General admission weekend packages include a non-reserved seat in the general admission section, which is in the back of the room behind the Silver seats. These packages usually run between \$75-100. Preferred single-day tickets include a reserved seat in the front of the general admission section. These tickets are priced based on the status of the guests for that day. Whichever day the two main stars, Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki, are scheduled (usually Sunday) is priced at least \$25 over the other full-day ticket, and Friday tickets are cheaper still, as the events start late in the afternoon. Single-day general admission tickets are the cheapest, and are also priced according to the guests scheduled.

Seating arrangements in the “theater,” as Creation calls it on the event schedules, depend on the size and layout of the ballroom, which naturally varies between locations. The theater in Cherry Hill was approximately two-thirds of the size of the theater in LA. The first 12 rows are always Gold seating. Gold seating in Cherry Hill was rows A through K. The theater was set up thusly:



The Gold ticket seats were in the first two blocks on the grid. Seats are usually assigned by purchase order except in special cases (see below). When a con is planned at the same facility during the next calendar year, ticket holders can take advantage of a special deal in which they can purchase a Gold ticket for the following year at a slight discount and choose a seat in the front rows. Silver ticket seats were in the second two blocks on the grid. V was the last row of Silver seats, but the letters skipped from S to V. After row V came general admission. General admission was the smallest section. I believe there were eight rows of eighteen seats, and only seats in the first two rows were numbered. Seat numbers were taped to the back of the chairs (see accompanying photos).

The LA theater was set up as follows:



Rows AA through K were Gold seats, M through Z were Silver seats, and the last fifteen rows were general admission. Seats in row AA, the very first row, were auctioned off for a higher price than the standard Gold ticket. I am not sure what the purpose of row L was or what ticket level was needed in order to sit there. Also, not pictured on the diagram was the video camera that projected images of the guests onto a screen behind the stage for the benefit of the people in the general admission seats. The camera replaced the last two seats in row O and was cordoned off by black ropes.

Each Creation “Salute to *Supernatural*” con includes the same events. The bulk of the day is devoted to the Q&A panels, the photo ops and the autographs. Each guest takes the stage for a forty-five minute question-and-answer session⁹ during which audience members can ask just about anything they want, which leads to some interesting situations.¹⁰ After the guest’s panel, he or she moves to another ballroom for photo ops. Photo ops offer the audience members the opportunity to have a professional photo taken with the guest. Example photo ops can be viewed on the Creation website. Photo ops are first-come, first-served; lines may contain as few as twenty and as many as 200 fans, depending on the guest. Photo ops vary in price from \$40 to close to \$300. Photo op tickets sold at the con are sometimes priced higher than those offered on the website prior to the con, and tickets are limited to a predetermined number. Autograph sessions usually involve several guests at once and often take place toward the end of the day. Fans are called up row by row to get an item autographed by each guest. Items may be brought from home, which is a more permissive policy than some conventions have. Those for whom

⁹ With the exception of Jensen’s and Jared’s panels. Jensen and Jared each do a 30-minute solo panel and then do a 30-minute joint panel with no breaks in between.

¹⁰ A fan once asked each male guest a question so distasteful that I will not repeat it in its entirety here, but it involved theoretically having one’s genitals nailed to a table.

autographs are not included in their ticket price must purchase autograph tickets at a cost of \$20-60. Also, Gold and Silver patrons must purchase tickets for additional autographs beyond the one that is included in their ticket price.

The two events that all ticket holders have the option of attending are the karaoke party, which is free to attend, and the concert, for which non-Gold patrons must purchase a ticket. The karaoke party is held either in the hotel bar or in a banquet room and is open to any hotel guest. It is also a drop-in event, meaning that the guests who are in the area will stop by the party and interact informally with the fans. Some can even be persuaded to perform with them.¹¹ The concert is free for Gold ticket holders but others must purchase a ticket for either reserved (Silver section) or general admission seats. The two performers involved are Jason Manns, a singer-songwriter and guitarist, and Steve Carlson, a rock/blues singer and guitarist backed by a full band. Both musicians performed separately at the LA con, but only Jason performed at the Cherry Hill con, and only Steve is scheduled for the Vancouver con in August. Both musicians are friends of *Supernatural* star Jensen Ackles and both have had songs included in an episode.

The two events open only to Gold ticket holders are the dessert party on Saturday night and the breakfast on Sunday morning. The Saturday guests attend the dessert party and interact informally with the fans. One of the actors at the Cherry Hill con compared it to speed dating, as guests move from table to table and spend exactly three minutes at each. Seating is not assigned at the dessert party. The breakfast I attended at the Cherry Hill convention was run a bit differently than usual. At most cons, the guests at the breakfast are Jared and Jensen and the two speak on a mini-stage at one end of the room. Seating is assigned to minimize conflict.

¹¹ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9SP8E50pCw>.

However, neither of the main stars were present at Cherry Hill, so the four Sunday guests attended the breakfast instead and the procedure was the same as the dessert party, with the guests rotating from table to table.

III. Cherry Hill, NJ, March 6-8, 2009: Exceeding My Expectations

The Cherry Hill con was my first *Supernatural* con, and as such, I had no idea what to expect. The first of many pleasant surprises came when I arrived at the Crowne Plaza on Friday afternoon. On my way to check in I ran into Kat--a woman I'd met at WinchesterCon, a fan-run *Supernatural* con a few months prior--in the parking lot. She excitedly informed me that she'd just come from the restaurant, where actor Chad Lindberg and musician Jason Manns were having lunch together. "You could see all the fangirls in the room trying not to freak out," she said. "But everybody was cool, and nobody bothered them."

Registration for Gold ticket holders began at 2:00 pm in front of the ballroom that was serving as the theater. The long line was full of young women, most between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five. Many were dressed in trendy fashions--hoodies, jeans, short sweaters over longer t-shirts--but a few were already decked out in *Supernatural* t-shirts, both the official designs made by Creation and fan-produced designs made by online services such as CafePress. The women were mostly below-average to average weight and height, and most had shoulder-length or longer hair.

At the registration table I was given my "free gift," a black logo tote bag, and a yellow plastic wristband which I was instructed to wear all three days. I was supposed to receive a lanyard to protect my ticket, which I would also need all three days, but they had run out and the next shipment would not arrive until Saturday morning. As I was leaving the registration area, I

passed a young man in his mid-twenties standing near the end of the line. He was the only male in the line and he appeared to be alone.

Supernatural is a very male-centric and male-oriented program. It is primarily a horror/suspense series, with some action/adventure and occasional comedic elements. The two main characters are male, and male recurring characters have longer life spans and receive better response from fans than female recurring characters. However, the *fandom* for *Supernatural* is approximately 99% female. Most online fandoms skew heavily female; Bacon-Smith observes that “women find themselves an overwhelming majority among media fans who create, read, and discuss their community’s own fiction and art based on the characters and situations in their favorite television, movie, and even book series” (1992: 22).

The young man was assigned the seat directly behind mine in the theater, and I quickly struck up a conversation with him and requested an interview. He was kind enough to speak to me between the first and second panels on Friday afternoon. His name was Matt and he was a 27-year-old resident of Haddon Township, NJ. He was a relatively new fan who began watching the show during season three. He was indeed attending the con alone, as none of his friends or family watch the show. “I wanted to see who else was into the show just like I was; I wanted to see who else was out there,” he said. “There’s a lot of women! It’s sort of stereotypical, a little sexist to think that a show that’s about gore and blood and a car is really targeted towards guys, but women *love* this show. I think one of the reasons that’s given typically...is that Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles are on it, but I give the female fans a lot more credit than that. They’re not just into it for eye candy...I think it’s just substantially a very very good show...it’s sort of a soap opera but it’s also kinda manly at the same time.”

Matt also revealed that he did not participate in the online aspects of fandom, although he had sought out fan fiction a couple of times. After the con, Matt started interacting with fans through LiveJournal. LiveJournal is a blogging client platform that allows both single and group users to create and maintain journals. Group journals, called *communities*, can support up to 50,000 members and posting access can be limited through moderation. Privacy settings allow LiveJournal users to designate other users as “friends” and give those friends access to “locked” entries that regular users cannot read. Many fan fiction authors share their work in their own personal journals or in community journals. One advantage of “publishing” work this way is the comment system that LiveJournal utilizes. For the most part, anyone can leave a comment on a LiveJournal entry regardless of whether he or she possesses a LiveJournal. LiveJournal users can also comment anonymously to entries. This provides readers a way to give instant feedback to the fan fiction author.

I met several of my informants in a LiveJournal community called spn_njcon. The purpose of the community was to facilitate contact between fans attending the con. Once the tentative schedule had appeared on the Creation website, some of the fans on spn_njcon expressed some dissatisfaction with the amount of unscheduled free time. Rachel, who goes by the LiveJournal username kowaiyoukai, suggested that fans should get together and hold informal fan panels on fan fiction. I volunteered my single hotel room for one panel and requested that I be allowed to host the RPS panel. Rachel agreed and we spread the word that the RPS panel would take place between the autographing and the dessert party Saturday night. The autographing followed the Saturday panels, which featured actors Gabriel Tigerman, Richard Speight, Jr. and Traci Dinwiddie.

The most interesting panel from an academic's point of view was Richard Speight, Jr.'s, which was the first panel of the afternoon. Ferris (2001) describes events such as the Q&A panels as "prestaged encounter[s]," in which "fans can interact directly with celebrities but cannot do so at will" and their requests must fit within "tightly orchestrated limits" (33). Fans, however, are not always informed as to what the limits are, which can lead to awkward moments.

The young woman at the microphone had waist-length green hair pulled into a ponytail and she sported a black t-shirt that said, "Sam/Dean -- gay love can save the day." Her shirt was a reference to a genre of fan fiction known as Wincest--slash¹² stories in which brothers (and protagonists) Sam and Dean Winchester have an incestuous romantic and/or sexual relationship. She had asked interesting and thoughtful questions of previous guests, so she was received positively by the audience.

Then she proceeded to ask Richard, "What do you think about Wincest?"

There was a split-second pause, during which stunned audience members stared in horror at seatmates or her, and then the room as a whole booed her loudly. Richard, to his credit, was a consummate professional, responding simply, "I'm gonna say I'm not for it. Call me square but incest is not my bag. Sorry." Sheepishly, the fan thanked him and scurried back to her seat in the back of the Gold section.

Shave (2004) describes slash fandom as a contemporary site of carnival, and I believe that the carnivalesque nature of slash fandom contributed to the fan's lapse in judgment. Shave notes that Bakhtin "posits a two-world condition," in which the world of the carnival is self-

¹² From Wikipedia: Slash fiction is a genre of fan fiction that focuses on the depiction of romantic or sexual relationships between characters of the same-sex. While the term was originally restricted to stories in which one or more male media characters were involved in an explicit adult relationship as a primary plot element, it is now more generally used to refer to any fan story containing a pairing between male characters.

contained and exists independently of the physical world it inhabits. Bakhtin's carnival is "not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it" (1968: 7). Slash fans congregate together on the Internet, creating a space for themselves that is not physical, but social. Inside this space, what the "mundane" (i.e. non-fannish) world views as abnormal, private and shameful--rampant homosexuality; free, unfettered displays of sexual expression; sadism, masochism, and other kinks; promiscuity and polyamory--becomes accepted as normal and unremarkable. The danger inherent in this arrangement is that the fan has no physical indication of what is and is not carnival space; while many fans designate a physical space for their fandom activities (inside a bedroom or home office, a coffee shop with free Wi-Fi), not all of them do, and those who don't run the risk of losing sight of the borders between carnival and society proper, as the green-haired fan did. Carnival "mark[s] the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (Bakhtin 1968: 10). The green-haired fan, lost in the carnival, failed to respect the hierarchical boundaries between herself and the actor. This happens with alarming regularity in fandom; it is easy to forget that after years of reading interviews and press releases, watching talk show appearances and con panels, and speaking to them during photo ops and autograph sessions, that being a *fan* of an actor is not the same as being a *friend*. This is one of the perils of what Ferris calls the "radically asymmetrical relations" between fan and actor (2001: 44).

The RPS panel, then, brought the carnival to the physical space of the hotel. Fourteen LiveJournal users who read and/or write RPS gathered in my hotel room on Saturday night between 7:30 and 9:00 pm to discuss RPS in a safe, friendly environment. The participants,

thirteen women and Matt, first went around the room giving their names, LiveJournal user names, favorite actor/character and “favorite J2 moment.”¹³ As is typical of the fandom at large, the proportion of Jensen/Dean lovers to Jared/Sam lovers was approximately two to one. Jensen/Dean tends to inspire greater devotion among *Supernatural* fangirls both in quantity and quality than Jared/Sam as a general rule.¹⁴ In Caughey’s study of imaginary social relationships, he found that “erotic attraction is a basic part of the appeal” of media figures and that most of his female informants described their relationships with celebrities in romantic terms (1984: 41). One unusual aspect of RPS fandom is that the fan actually fantasizes more about the actors wanting to be with *one another* than with her. The two most cited J2 moments among the thirteen fangirls were 1) the two of them disclosing that they live together¹⁵ and 2) Jensen reading aloud a saved text message from Jared to an Italian journalist during an interview. The text message reads, “Hey dude. Thinking about you. Hope it’s going well.” Sarah, the unofficial moderator, read the text message twice and it inspired much squeeing and flailing. *Squeeing* and *flailing* are both fandom terms made popular on the Internet; the Urban Dictionary website defines squeeing as “a noise primarily made by an over-excited fangirl” or “the cry of the rabid fangirl.” It is usually a loud, high-pitched, inarticulate squeal, not unlike dolphin vocalizations. Urban Dictionary defines flailing as “the act of hyperactively talking about one’s fandom and/or obsession. Squealing, clapping, gasping, obsessing, dizziness, speechlessness and random hand motions are all symptoms.” When the text message interview came out, a common fandom proclamation was, “Oh my God, they are so married!” The fandom slang term for RPS

¹³ J2 (pronounced *J-squared*) is the pairing (‘*ship*’) designation for Jared/Jensen RPS.

¹⁴ Jensen also has more trouble with obsessed fans and stalkers than Jared, unfortunately.

¹⁵ After the con, Jensen revealed in an interview that he is listed on the mortgage of the house he shares with Jared in Vancouver.

fans who fervently believe their favorite pairing has a secret romantic relationship in reality is *tinhat*. The term is derived from the popular image of schizophrenics wearing tinfoil hats to “keep out the alien thought rays” and first referred to an especially obsessive group of *Lord of the Rings* RPS fans. The panel concluded with a discussion of our individual entrances into online fandom. First fandoms included *Harry Potter*, *The X-Files*, *Due South*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Stargate SG-1*, and *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*. After that, we compared the most traumatizing slash pairings we’d ever found. Candidates included Charlie Brown/Linus, Garfield/Pooky (his teddy bear), Calvin/Hobbes, and Scooby-Doo/Shaggy.¹⁶

The next day, Sunday, I got to see more queering and flailing firsthand. Sunday was the best-attended day of the convention due to the fact that both Jim Beaver and Misha Collins were slated to appear. After Jensen and Jared, Jim and Misha are the *Supernatural* actors most beloved by the fandom as a whole. Jim’s character, Bobby Singer, is the only recurring character from the first season¹⁷ to survive into the present. Misha’s character, the angel Castiel, was added to the series in the fourth season opener and was immediately embraced by the fandom. From an interview on Australian TV:

Misha: At first I was nervous because I know that some of the other characters who have been introduced to the show haven’t gone over well...especially some of the women...

Jensen: Yes.

Jared: All of the women.

¹⁶ Keep in mind that these are supposed to be sexual couplings. These are deviant even by fandom’s unconventional standards. Bestiality is one of the few taboos that is still almost universal even in fandom.

¹⁷ He was introduced in episode 1.22, “Devil’s Trap.”

Misha: All women.

Jared: Women are not welcomed by the fans.

Misha: This is an incredibly sexist group of people, the fandom.

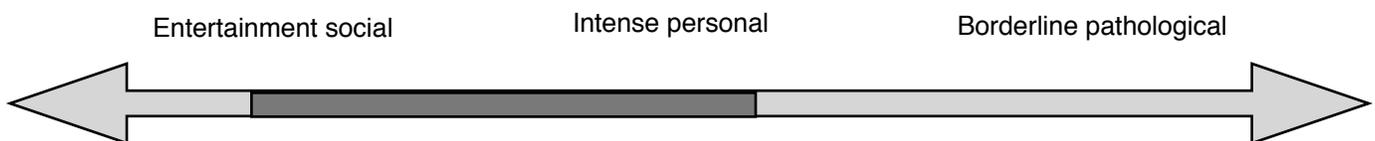
Jared: Against their own sex.

Misha: But fortunately I am, to date, not a woman...so I have that going for me.¹⁸

Judging by the number of fangirls standing in line for photo ops with Misha on Sunday morning, Misha was far and away the most popular guest. I was not able to obtain an exact count, but I would estimate that there were at least 100 girls in front of me and probably fifty behind me. The photo op room was on a mezzanine level of the hotel and the line was forced to double back on itself due to fire codes and hotel regulations. The line turned a corner at one point and it wasn't until then that one could actually see the room. For about thirty minutes, I was able to observe fangirls leaving the room after their photo ops. A couple of girls squeed aloud once they were out of the actor's and photographer's earshot, and a few wrung their hands or fanned their faces. Many others sighed, put a hand over their heart, and smiled ear to ear. My informant Sarah told me later, "I was freaking out. I totally told him 'I love you!' and ran away afterwards. I almost tripped on the light on my way out" (personal communication, 2009). There is a noticeable "glow" about girls who have just come into contact with the objects of their affections; it is an almost rapturous look. Fandom and religion share many characteristics, as Jindra (1994) points out in his exploration of the religious qualities of *Star Trek* fandom. Fandom's term for its professionally produced source material is *canon*, and media canon has the same significance to fans as religious canon does to its followers. Both North et al. and

¹⁸ See <http://missyjack.livejournal.com/401093.html>.

McCutcheon et al. use the word “worship” to describe fans’ behavior toward their favorite celebrities. North et al. (2007) identify three types of celebrity worship: entertainment social, intense personal, and borderline pathological. Entertainment social is a “normal” interest in the life of one’s favorite celebrities--watching them on TV or in movies, reading about them in magazines, discussing them with friends. Intense personal occurs when a fan perceives herself to have a special personal connection to the celebrity, believing that they are “meant to be” or “soul mates.” Borderline pathological involves the fan having disordered, unhealthy beliefs about the celebrity and is associated with the behavior known as “stalking” (292). I view these types of celebrity worship as a continuum:



I would place most of the fans I met in Cherry Hill in the dark gray section of the continuum.

Overall, the impression I took from the Cherry Hill con was that being a fan and interacting with other fans in the physical space of the hotel as opposed to online was just as important to most of the attendees as meeting the actors. There was also a somewhat surprising amount of unity among fans. Most seemed to have similar beliefs and expectations for the actors and for one another, and the general sense at the end of the con was that expectations had been exceeded.

IV. Los Angeles, CA, March 27-29, 2009: Mixed Feelings

Looking back on the sum total of my experiences, I have mixed feelings about the LA con. One reason is that I had a Silver ticket in LA, therefore I was not able to attend all the events. Also, the LA con was close to twice as large as the Cherry Hill con, so autograph

sessions and photo ops took longer, but were more rushed on an individual basis. In Cherry Hill, the actors were able to personalize the autographs (see accompanying photos), even for fans who had multiple items. This was not the case in LA. Although a couple of actors went against Creation's wishes and wrote semi-personal notes for fans (my seatmate, Amber, joked that Richard "wrote a book" on hers; he indeed covered about a third of the 8x10" picture with writing), most others signed their names only.

However, I am a fangirl first and an ethnographer second, so I have to admit that getting to touch Jensen Ackles was pretty darn amazing. In the moment immediately afterward, I "got it." My Cherry Hill seatmate, Rachel (who attended the LA con as well) revealed to me that she has probably spent more than \$10,000 on cons since 2007, and I suddenly understood her motivation perfectly. That moment of connection, that transition from fantasy to reality, as fleeting as it is, is a transcendent experience. The resolution of the anticipation and anxiety provokes the release of endorphins that combine with the heightened emotions to make the entire experience not unlike an orgasm. Like any other pleasure, it has the potential to become addictive. Rachel mentioned that there is a group of fifty to sixty fangirls that she encounters at every con who always purchase Gold tickets and duplicate photo ops.

Caughey explains that "admiration relationships with media figures also have an important fantasy dimension" (1984: 56). For one fan in particular, maintaining the fantasy dimension of the relationship was more important than the actor's wishes. I did not witness the situation or hear about it during the con; I found out about it later from friends on LiveJournal. Jensen's girlfriend, actress Danneel Harris, accompanied him to the con. During the autograph sessions, a Creation volunteer usually sits with each actor to facilitate the transaction, but in this

case Danneel took the place of the volunteer. The fan in question requested that one of the security personnel escort Danneel off the property. The fan later claimed to be joking in a LiveJournal entry that she eventually privacy-locked. Before the entry was locked, however, some members of the Journalfen.net community “Fandom Wank” collected quotes from the entry. Here are some examples:

I paid good money to see Jensen which did not include access [sic] baggage.

I know man I was livid when I saw her there, she just killed my moment...

Seriously I even asked the security to throw her out...[the guard] laughed getting my drift.

What gives her the right to be there? we did not pay to see her, far as I know she was not part of the package...And if it gets back to Jensen good, maybe he will leave her ass at home on in [sic] the hotel room next time.

I will say and fell [sic] what I want its my opinion as I said...what ever [sic] reason she was there is not my concern, plenty of creations [sic] was there who could have helped him counted [sic], as his girlfriend I surely would not kill the fans [sic] moment.

“Fandom Wank” users proceeded to excoriate her for being so rude and displaying such an outrageous sense of entitlement. User tachikoma01 says,

I occasionally do guest liason [sic] work for conventions. Basically you're the guests [sic] personal gopher: you get them things they need, get them to their panels on time, make sure they're comfortable, and keep the fans paws [sic] off of

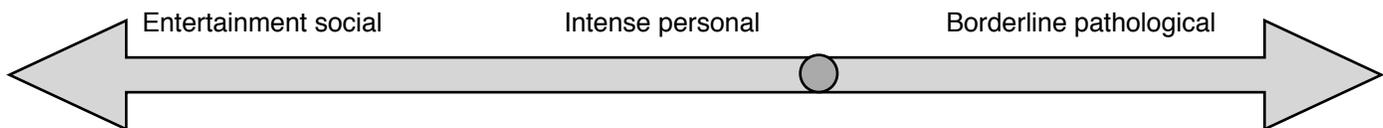
them (assuming they want the paws off, that is. Some of them are pretty cool with the paws.)

I've gotten looks that could kill when having to get between a fan who is overstepping their boundaries and the guest. And even people sneering things like "Don't get in the way of MY [insert thing here.]" Like they own the guest.

And if I'm getting that as only a liason [*sic*]... I can only imagine how bad S.O.s have it.

[And yes, many of [the fans] do seem to live in a fantasy world where the girlfriend is the only thing keeping them from having amazing sex with the celebrity. Or at least giving him a MS Paint drawing of them doing him.] (Snacky 2009)

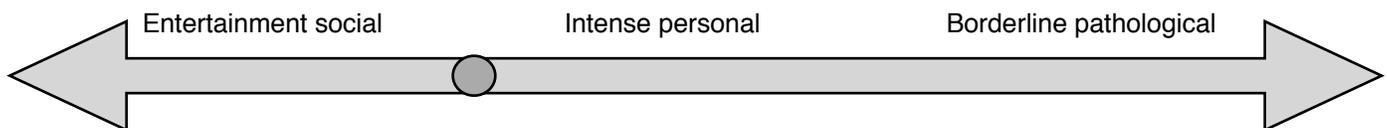
I would place the fan in question on the celebrity worship continuum in this position:



As with the Wincest incident at Cherry Hill, fans sometimes overstep the bounds of social propriety, assuming a reciprocal relationship with a celebrity when none exists.

The biggest surprise of the LA con was the number of international attendees. Over the course of the weekend, I met more overseas fans than American fans, and very few fans who were local to southern California. In Cherry Hill, the fans were overwhelmingly local, hailing from New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, or Maryland. In LA I met four native Brits, a Dutch woman residing in Britain, a Hungarian woman residing in Britain, two Irish girls, three French Canadians, an Australian and a Kiwi. I befriended the Irish sisters, Treasa and Julie, shortly after

I arrived. They were astonished that I identified them as *Supernatural* fangirls before we even exchanged words. I explained that they were the right age and gender and that fashion- and makeup-wise, they fit the general appearance of the common fangirl. They had never met any *Supernatural* fangirls in person before, so they had no idea what a generic “fangirl” would look like. Being the nominal expert, I shared my findings with them. Neither had never been to any cons before, but Treasa was scheduled to go to Chicago in November and they had both seen videos from previous cons. They wanted “to meet fellow fans as well as the stars, but also to get to see America; this is our first trip ever to America.” That was common among the overseas fans; several came early and stayed late to sightsee. I interviewed the sisters Friday morning and both were very excited for the con to start. “I was dreaming all night last night about convention scenarios in my head,” said Treasa. “They usually ended up with Jensen and Jared in our room.” I would place the sisters in this position on the celebrity worship continuum:



Another interesting moment came during Misha Collins’s panel. Cherry Hill was his first con and LA was his second. He was much more comfortable on stage and with the fans in LA. Toward the end of the panel, a fan asked, “What was it like to have Kiefer Sutherland (of *24*) on top of you?” Misha’s immediate response was, “Is this going to be a resource for some slash fic?” The audience erupted in laughter, applause and cheers. He went on to say that fandom is “pretty weird...this slash fic thing, I’m kind of fascinated by it; I’ve read a few of them...and yeah, it’s definitely stuck with me. I’m fascinated by subcultures and communities that seem to

evolve organically, and this seems to be a very interesting one. I'd love to find out more about it--without getting, you know, molested. I'm not quite sure how to explore it, but I am interested in it." There have long been rumors that the producers and actors read fan fiction, but I was quite shocked to hear an actor confirm the fact. The concept of the "fourth wall" in film and television applies to fandom as well; fans are fans, producers¹⁹ are producers, and separation is expected to be maintained. The creative boundaries parallel the social boundaries. Fan fiction is a form of copyright infringement and it is illegal to publish it for profit. Most authors and producers consider it a good form of publicity and turn a blind eye, but there are some famous cases of copyright holders prohibiting fan fiction of their work.²⁰ While I was getting Misha's autograph (for the second time), I described briefly the research I was doing at the con and joked that I could give him a reading list. He replied, "I would appreciate that, actually." I deeply regret not thinking to write down some titles for him at the time.

V. Conclusion: Fangirls Just Want to Have Fun

Overall, my con experiences were overwhelmingly rewarding. I thoroughly enjoyed meeting both the actors and my fellow fangirls. All of the attendees I met were excited and happy to be at the con; I did not personally come into contact with any of the negative fans. I vacillated between being a fan and being an academic several times each weekend; my emotional reactions to meeting the stars I admire and lust after each week were just too overwhelming. However, I believe that gave me an insight into my informants that a non-fan would not be able to achieve. I also believe that my informants were able to connect with me because I was "one

¹⁹ In the sense of "people involved in the production of the film/program," not the title given to television and film executives.

²⁰ See <http://www.fanfiction.net/guidelines/> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legal_issues_with_fan_fiction.

of them.” Too many academic accounts of fandom are written from an exclusively etic perspective and the authors sometimes convey a slight sense of contempt for their subjects. Fandom’s moral and aesthetic standards are markedly different from those of mainstream society and some academics cannot overcome their own innate distaste. I believe my participation in fandom allowed me to make a fair assessment of the fans I met.

When dealing with such a large and diverse group, it is inevitable that there will be a few bad apples. There were a few fans at each con that acted inappropriately and cast a slight pall over the festivities. However, for the most part, neither the actors nor the attendees allowed these fans to spoil their fun. I was surprised at the amount of unity among fans, especially at the Cherry Hill event, where all of my informants expressed as much interest in meeting and relating to other fans as they did the actors. Television viewing is a somewhat solitary experience; even if an individual watches a program with others, each person interprets what they see and hear differently and therefore each has a different experience. The online nature of fandom means that fans often have no real-life companions who enjoy the program the way they do. The cons are a chance for fans to connect on a personal level, to put faces to the screen names. Discussing fan fiction with fellow fans in real time and being able to hear the laughter, squeeing and flailing was an immensely enjoyable experience. Imaginary social relationships are rewarding in their own way, but there is no substitution for physical, real-time human contact.

In summary, cons allow fans to connect both with fellow fans and with the actors with which they have imaginary social relationships. These personal connections are, for the most part, intensely satisfying. Although some fans’ bad behavior makes the other fans and actors uncomfortable, the fans are mostly a pleasant, enthusiastic group.

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