We’ve Got The Touch
An Exploration of The Role of Fandom in Contemporary Society

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This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for a Bachelor of Media in Screen Production With Honours (H1224) at Murdoch University

2014
DECLARATION

I, Ryan James Meakins, declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains, as its content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institute.

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ABSTRACT

Fandom [has] a fundamental and widespread social role in contemporary western society (Alexander and Harris 5).

Since its launch in 1984, the Transformers franchise, created by the toy manufacturers Hasbro Inc. and TOMY Takara, has become one of the biggest science fiction franchises, its audience size only exceeded by Star Wars (Shook and Swan 6). As a fan of the Transformers franchise from the age of six, I wanted to learn more about fandom and my fellow fans and to achieve a greater understanding of the interconnections and linkages within the Transformers fandom. Through this I hoped to discover the role of fandoms in contemporary society. To do this I decided to develop and produce a documentary film entitled, We’ve Got The Touch: The Fandom in Disguise.

There is a structure to the world of fans and fandoms. It is built from the connections that exist between the cultural texts and products of a franchise, the individual fans and their behaviours and the various social networks, locations and events that those fans inhabit. The genesis and development of these connections and the effect they have on individuals, their relationships with others and with society at large is a fascinating and worthy field of study.

In the accompanying film We’ve Got The Touch: The Fandom in Disguise, and in this dissertation, I will argue that the concepts of identity formation, community, social and spiritual support networks, the ‘Third Place’, and new media technologies are all related to fandom. I show how the concepts can be used to gain a better understanding of the how fandoms work, their structure and their role in contemporary society, using the Transformers fan culture as my argument’s main site of discussion.
DVD of Honours Production

“WE’VE GOT THE TOUCH
Fandom in Disguise”

Produced and directed by Ryan James Meakins
Executive producer Melanie Rodriga
Run Time – 35 mins

2014
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COPYRIGHT LICENCE</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HONOURS FILM DVD</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>10 — 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom and The <em>Transformers</em></td>
<td>12 — 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom and Identity Formation</td>
<td>15 — 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 3</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom and Community</td>
<td>18 — 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 4</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom, Social Support Networks,</td>
<td>21 — 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion and the ‘Third Place’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONCLUSION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDIX ONE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honours Copyright and Credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDIX TWO</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archival Report (Credits)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>REFERENCES</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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INTRODUCTION

A fan is defined as an individual who eagerly supports and has a strong personal connection to — and fascination with — a particular object, person, brand or organisation. A fandom at its most basic is a group of individuals who all identify as fans of the same thing. However, there is much more to fandom than this, and that is my aim in this thesis, to answer the question — what is the role of fandom in contemporary society?

In primary school I did not have many, well any, friends so I would spend my recess and lunch breaks thinking about “stuff”, particularly the various franchises I liked such as Transformers, Power Rangers, Star Wars and Bionicles. I would think about the characters and the technology and the stories, and I would think about how they could have been done differently, what I would I do were I in the position of the heroes, and what would I do were I the villain. I believe that it is largely through this thinking process and its relationship to the narrative universe of Transformers that my moral code was forged.

As a life long member of the Transformers fandom, I am interested in learning more about its structure and the relationships that drive it, as well as understanding those linkages that make it all possible. To further this understanding I made a documentary film that explores the nature of fandom in contemporary society, entitled We’ve Got The Touch: Fandom in Disguise.

There is a structure to the world of the Transformers fan and it reveals a series of interconnections between the products, other fans and the behaviours of these fans. The genesis and ensuing development of this structure is fascinating and worthy of further exploration and study, but it is the relationships within the structure and interconnections themselves that are of most interest to me, as it is these relationships that largely determine the structure and evolution of fandom (Alexander and Harris 5).
Fandoms are an interesting aspect of modern popular culture, and to discover their role in contemporary society I explore some of the concepts that, I argue, hold the key to uncovering this role. These concepts are identity formation, community, social support networks, religion and the third place.

Before I discuss the relationships within fandom I’ll briefly discuss the history and development of the Transformers franchise and its associated fandom. I will not be exploring the rich veins of symbolism and cultural value of the multi-media content connected to the franchise. My main focus will be on how the fans interact with each other, their chosen cultural texts, and with the rest of society.
CHAPTER 1
Fandom and The Transformers

Using a sociology of culture perspective, fandom is re-conceptualised as a spectrum of practices engaged in to develop a sense of personal control or influence over the object of the fandom (such as a star or text), in which the outcome of one’s involvement is not as important as the involvement itself – recognized membership and interaction centred around common object (Alexander and Harris 5).

A fandom is defined as a group of individuals brought together by a shared interest in particular — or sets of — media texts, often from the sci-fi or fantasy genres. These cultural texts can include novels, books, movies, TV shows, cartoons, video games, board games, animations and toys. Fandoms form when individual fans come together to discuss these worlds and through these interactions they are able to not only fill in the gaps of the fictional universe, but form interconnections and relationships between each other.¹

Some common fandoms include ‘Trekkers’, who are fans of Star Trek, ‘Whoovians’ who are fans of Doctor Who, the ‘Brown Coats’ who are fans of the TV show Firefly, and ‘Bronies’ who are fans of the cartoon My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic. In this dissertation I focus on the ‘Trans-fans’ who are fans of the Transformers brand and franchise.

Over the years fans and fandoms have been viewed in a number of ways. Academia for example, while interested in the social phenomena, tends to conduct more research on what fans do rather than why they do it. Alison Alexander and Cheryl Harris, in Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subcultures and Identity tell us that the media industry, on the other hand, sees fans as a important and valuable resource, a powerful research ‘tool’ that can be used to create more profitable content and products that are tailored to a pre-existing target market. The press appears to be thoroughly ‘invested in the idea of fandom as highly stigmatised,

¹ To clarify, when I refer to fandoms I will be referring to the groups of adult fans, rather than the younger fans, i.e. children.
marked by danger abnormality and silliness, in which fans engage in secret lives without much purpose’ (5). The fans, however, see their fandoms as a valid activity and ‘define themselves and their roles very differently from any of these groups’ (5).

It is not enough then, to define a fandom merely as a group of individuals who are grouped together because they identify as fans of the same source text. There must be more at play here — more to the interconnections and relationships that form between these individuals — and that is what I intend to discover by looking at my own fandom, the *Transformers* fandom.

**Transformers 101**

The *Transformers* brand refers to a franchise that is both a toy line and a ‘master-narrative’ that is produced, marketed and otherwise played over various media and marketing platforms. *Transformers* is jointly owned and managed by Hasbro Inc. and Takara TOMY toy companies. The toy line consists of a series of action figures that are capable of changing, or ‘transforming’, from one mode — often a humanoid robot — to another, such as a vehicle, animal or even an everyday object. Furthermore, each figure has its own ‘dual identity’, which fits it into a larger fictional universe, the brand’s master-narrative (Fleming125). The master-narrative is provided via what has come to be known as Trans-media storytelling, in other words its is delivered through the collaboration of multiple media forms working together to create a ‘soap-opera like framework’ in which the individuals can interact, or ‘play’ with the toys, re-enacting and expanding upon the narratives they view in the media form as well as the narratives of the characters and ideals, that each figure represents (Bainbridge 829) (Fleming 124).

Hasbro Inc. officially launched the *Transformers* brand in 1984, using a — at the time — unique three pronged marketing stratagem that they had developed previously for the 1980s *G.I. Joe* reboot. The strategy consisted of the simultaneous launch of a syndicated half hour animated TV show, a monthly comic book series by Marvel comics and a traditional advertising campaign. They had developed this strategy in order to reproduce the extraordinary sales of toys
connected to popular movies and television programs, such as the *Star Wars* action figures, in addition to circumventing the strict regulations around the advertisement of children’s products (Hidalgo 14) (Bainbridge 829). The combined uses of the cartoon, comic and toy packaging — which had a short description of the personality of the figure within — allowed Hasbro to build up the narrative world of the *Transformers* within the minds of its target audience. The unique transformation play feature and this exciting in-built narrative made this first generation of the *Transformers* the most popular toy in the USA by the Christmas of 1984.

To ensure the sustainability of this popularity, Hasbro regularly discontinues and reboots the *Transformers* brand. Each new generation of the *Transformers* is a new take on the basic concepts set out in the original 1984 to 1991 run, retroactively dubbed *Generation 1*, ensuring that each new version of the brand is a perfect mix of new and interesting concepts and elements of what came before. This ensures that the brand will not only draw in new fans but will continue to sell to an older fan base (Hidalgo 14).

Although there have been many different versions and interpretations of the *Transformers*, the general premise of the master narrative has remained the same. The *Transformers* is set in a distant corner of the galaxy — a strange mechanical, metal, alien world known as Cybertron, and on this world there exists life, but not life, as we know it. Upon this planet lives a race of sentient ‘autonomous robotic organisms’ known as the Transformers. These living machines have minds and thoughts much like any sentient organic species, but their mighty bodies give them extraordinary abilities, the greatest of which is the power to convert their robotic forms into alternate configurations, or ‘Alt-modes’. They often use this ability to disguise themselves when they visit other worlds. Typical modes are vehicles, electronic devices, weapons, everyday objects and even animals and monsters.

However, the mighty beings do not live together in peace, and although the reasons can differ between the various generations, Cybertron is always plunged into a devastating civil war. The antagonist is the evil conqueror Megatron and his
fearsome army of Decepticons aiming to take control. The protagonists are the noble and wise Optimus Prime and his band of heroic Autobots, fighting to stop Megatron’s evil plans and bring peace back to their home. Eventually the war consumes their planet, leaving it a lifeless husk, and the two warring factions head out into the galaxy, both in search of resources, and/or some other artefact that will help them either destroy their enemies and conquer the galaxy, or restore Cybertron and bring the war to a peaceful end. This search inevitably brings their war to Earth, where the Autobots side with humanity to prevent the planet suffering the same fate that befell their home, by defeating the Decepticons once and for all.

As I stated before I consider myself to be a *Transformers* fan, or ‘Trans-fan’, as we are often known. I shall now discuss why I have chosen to use this fandom as the main case study for my written dissertation and documentary film. Basically a Trans-fan is a fan of some aspect (if not all) aspects of the *Transformers* franchise, and who participates in some way in the *Transformers* fandom. Just like all other fans Trans-fans take part in a number of fan behaviours, including the production and display of fan-art, fiction, figure customisation, heated discussions of the official brand content, the consumption of relevant cultural texts (both old and new), as well as the collection, trading and appreciation of brand related ephemera and merchandise.

The *Transformers* fandom has existed since the brand began, with Hasbro itself founding the first official *Transformers* fan club, dubbed *S.T.A.R.S* (*Secret Transformers Autobot Rescue Squad*), in 1985. In fact the club was really just a mail order shopping program that allowed fans to access exclusive figures (Hidalgo 23). The interaction between the fans and the content producers, Hasbro and Takara TOMY, has long been a mutually beneficial one. The content producers actually encourage fandoms, as they have proved to be invaluable in terms of market research and overall brand development. The toy producers embrace the dual target audiences — the children and the adult fans — and aims to cater to both groups, often having at least two product lines available, one for each group (Hidalgo 48-51). Today, the ‘Official Transformers Collectors Club’, a Hasbro sanctioned *Transformers* fan group, runs the ‘official’ side of the
fandom. Members of the group pay a yearly fee and receive a bi-monthly magazine that has exclusive news, sneak peaks and comics. They also have the opportunity to purchase exclusive limited edition action figures and products. The group also organises the official annual *Transformers* Fan Convention, Bot-Con (Hidalgo 75).

Another interesting aspect of the *Transformers* fandom is that they are effective users of new media and social media technologies, which enable fans from across the world to connect and communicate faster and more easily than ever before. This online fandom is also responsible for the development of a glossary of terms now used in an official context (Hidalgo 37). The *Transformers* franchise has reached an audience that is second only to *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* but it is largely ignored because it is not considered to be ‘hard sci-fi’ and so is thought of as being unworthy and childish (Swan and Shook 6). This, along with my own familiarity with the brand and my closeness to fellow fans is one of the primary reasons I have chosen to use this fandom as the main case study in my exploration of the role of fandom in contemporary culture.
CHAPTER 2
Fandom and Identity Formation

Identifying with a fellow being, experiencing his pain and reasoning to
the conclusion that causing such pain is wrong might very well result in
genuine moral growth … The proper instructional role of narrative is not
to inundate children with moral maxims, but rather; educating the sense
of empathy and developing moral reasoning skills (Wonderly 6).

In this chapter I discuss how fandoms and the multi-media texts that inspire them
influence the formation and development of an individual’s personal identity. The
concept of identity is a very complex and multilayered area of research. A number
of factors and elements can and do influence the formation of an individual’s
identity, and this formation is never truly complete. One’s identity is often in a
state of flux, altering and adapting as new stimuli and information enter the
equation of one’s life.

It is thought that an individual’s identity is developed over long periods of time
and is effected or influenced by a multitude of factors, including transitional
events, like puberty or moving to a new location, and repeated events like going
to church and school. Other things that have a bearing on identity formation
include the texts and information an individual consumes, the order in which it is
consumed, and the reasons the texts have become available for consumption. The
other individuals and institutions that exist around a given individual also effect
how their identity is formed (Simon 5).

According to Dan Fleming and Lincoln Geraghty the manner in which individuals
play with their toys when they are young can also effect how their identity forms.
Fleming and Geraghty’s theory is based on the concepts of ‘Affective Play’ and
‘Narrativisation’ either of which ‘helps children interact with fictional reality, or
make-believe, during play.’ This creates what Fleming terms a ‘semiotic space’
where toys can act as transitional objects, allowing children to experiment with
their own developing identities and understand the adult world. This ‘play’ with
these semiotic spaces provides children an opportunity to explore and experiment.
In re-enacting not just events from the texts but also from their own lives, by
playing with their toys they are able to test and explore alternate scenarios that arrive at different outcomes. Slowly over time this play starts building up in to an identity. This identity stays with them through out their adult lives influencing and informing their actions, even influencing their chosen circle of friends (Geraghty 186-189).

To put it another way, as children we attempt to interpret what we see, feel and experience of the world with our imaginations, through ‘imaginative play’. In this form of play, toys such as the Transformers figures, become ‘signs’ that we imbue with complex meanings, so that they represent certain concepts or elements that we attempt to comprehend (Bainbridge 838). Using toys a child can act out an internal processing of complex ideas, such as moral dilemmas, in the physical space. This enables the child to work through the problems they are experiencing in relative safety, essentially “speaking through the figures” (Wiegard 126) (Fleming 128). It is through this process that the child’s identity begins to be formed, but it is not exclusive to children as Geraghty states.

It offered a semiotic space where children could perhaps discover answers to some of the problems affecting them in their childhood… and it offers fans today the same semiotic space where nostalgia and long suppressed feelings of kinship and camaraderie can be revived in more modern times (Geraghty 189).

Following from this I would argue that fandoms also provide a kind of moral guidance through their texts, which can act as modern fables. This guidance can be used by an individual as the starting point for a moral code, which informs how they perceive the world, their own place in the world and their behaviour. This in turn informs how the rest of society perceives them. I think fandom and the texts on which they are based can have a huge impact on the formation of an individual’s identity, both when they are young and later on in their lives, in fact I am sure of it because it has had a considerable effect on my own identity. In particular I have formed emotional attachments to some Transformers characters. These characters have become heroes to me, perhaps — as Monique Wonderly suggests — because they remind me of myself, and what I aspire to become (7).
I myself strongly identify with the *Transformers* character Orion Pax, a low level Autobot archivist, who through courage, hard work and a belief in his principles was chosen by an ancient artefact called the Autobot Matrix of Leadership. He became the hero and leader Optimus Prime. So for me the *Transformers* provided me with a different way to see myself, almost ‘a projection of my own social ideologies and moral values’ (Wiegard132). This process of identification can even influence and inspire an individual’s future career choice. One of the ways I conveyed this concept in my film was by using a story from voice actor Paul Eiding. Eiding shared his experience of chatting with a fan who admired the Autobot, Preceptor, Paul’s character from the original 1980’s *Transformers* cartoon so much when he was a kid, that it inspired him to become a scientist when he grew up. In fact he become a member of the engineering crew of NASA’s space shuttle program.

I have chosen to discuss the concept of identity first in this thesis because one must first be a fan before they can become part of a fandom. Fandoms are about sharing your experiences with others who have either experienced in the past, or are going through now, the same experiences. This shared sense of experience and nostalgia provides something tangible for fans to converge and link to. By coming together and connecting they start to gain a sense of comradeship they are often denied in other parts of their lives. Basically, only by obtaining our identities as fans can we hope to seek out others like ourselves. This leads to the concept of fandom as a contemporary community, which I discuss as the next consideration of the role of fandoms in today’s society.
CHAPTER 3
Fandom as a Community

The term fandom is interchangeable with the term ‘fan community’, and many members of fandoms would also identify themselves as members of a community. However as Andrew Mason states, ‘Communities in the ordinary sense are a subset of groups: all communities are groups, but not all groups are communities’ (19). It follows that determining whether a fandom can be classified, as a community in the proper sense of the term is a necessary exercise. Firstly then, I shall define the features that differentiate a community from all other human groupings. Secondly, I shall reveal the presence, or lack of presence, of those features in the structures of the Transformers fandom.

The notion of a community, much like identity, can be a difficult concept to explore, due to the great variety of competing, and complementing, theories about a concept that we in fact experience on a daily basis. The most basic and broad definition of an ‘ordinary’ contemporary community is a group of individuals who communicate and come together because of something that they share, either by personal choice or unavoidable circumstances (Mason 19-21). An ‘ordinary community’, according to Mason, is defined by four basic aspects, which differentiate communities from other types of human groups. The first aspect is that the members of a community will have shared values and a similar moral or ethical code that they all know and accept. This can be extended to a shared belief in a cultural artefact or text from which these values originate. Secondly, all the members of the group will share a similar ‘way of life’, meaning they, for the most part, live a certain life style that is sometimes influenced by their shared belief system (Mason 19-26). Thirdly, all members of the group will identify with each other and with their shared beliefs and their shared practices and behaviours. They will empathise with one another and will have had similar experiences to each other. The fourth aspect states that members of the community are able to easily recognise other members of their community, through personal interaction and recognition of community specific-symbols, language and artefacts used or processed by the other individual members of the community. These four aspects
can be used to varying degrees to encompass the many different social groups that are considered to be contemporary communities (Mason19-26).

Thus, in a basic sense, a community is a group of people who can communicate with each other to be able to work together towards a common goal, and who are brought together by a shared connection to a particular thing, such as a specific cultural text. However, do these ideas relate to the concept of fandom? Or to pose the question another way, do fandoms fit into this definition of a modern day community?

Geraghty states that ‘being a part of a fan community, in an age of fractured society and social hierarchies, can be viewed as a positive strategy, balancing alienation at work with camaraderie through group membership’ (197). It is conceivable, then, that one might be able to apply the above definition of a community to the concept of fandom. The members of fandoms all share a fascination with a particular media text, or collection of media texts, such as the Transformers brand. The shared love, and the moral codes fans can draw from said texts means that the first of Geraghty’s defining aspects of community is present in fandom. The second aspect, which states that members of a community share a similar way of life, can also be found in fandom, but in a different way than one would expect. The fan way of life is secondary to the individual’s main life style choices. There are Transformers fans all over the globe, all living different lives with different careers and life choices, but they all have collections, they all meet up and discuss things online or in real life and they all partake in the same fan behaviours as any other fan, and member of the fan community.

The third aspect, that members of a community can empathise with each other, most definitely applies to fandom as many fandom members have endured the same experiences as their fellow fans. By this I mean both the positive experiences, such as discovering the text, finding the object you’ve always wanted in your collection, spending time with fellow fans, and also negative experiences, such as being bullied and harassed because of your affection for a text that is not widely known or accepted by the mainstream. So fans have a great deal of empathy for each other as they have all had very similar experiences, and because
of these experiences they all take part in similar behaviours and have similar reactions to various stimuli (Geraghty 192-193).

The fourth aspect, that the members of a community can recognise one another, is very readily applied to fandom. Members of various fandoms can easily identify each other because for the most part they proudly display their love for their chosen text through their clothes, jewellery, accessories and personal possessions, as well as through a common language. ‘Part of becoming a fan is immersion in a special lexicon often less than intelligible to outsiders, a practice common to membership initiation rituals in many groups’ (Alexander and Harris 8). They use images and phrases, such as “Transform and Roll Out!” or “Live Long and Prosper” as symbolic codes that are fandom specific, therefore those who are members of the fandom will see and understand these symbols, recognising their fellow fan in the process, while the significance goes over the heads of those outside the fandom (Shefrin 273).

Alexander and Harris say that today’s society is becoming increasingly fractured, and we are becoming more distant and isolated from one another, however through groups like fandoms, with the help of new media technologies, we are able to connect with each other. This not only helps us indulge our ‘otherwise silenced identities through a common interest in a symbol, icon or text’, but also means we can counteract feelings of ‘alienation through the social nature of fan practice.’ They go on to add the important point that an individual’s interaction and discourse with a fandom, like the Transformers fandom, can work to create a specific kind of community that becomes more important than the object of fandom itself (6). In the next chapter I shall discuss how these communities can act as social support networks.
CHAPTER 4
Fandom, Social Support Networks, Religion and the ‘Third Place’

Since in both instances the roots of the devotion are remarkably similar, fandom both ‘is’ and ‘is not’ like a religion, thus existing between the titles of ‘cult’ and ‘culture’ as demonstrated through the comparison of Transformers fans and religious devotees (Hill 117).

In the previous chapter I discussed how fandoms operate as contemporary communities. In this I shall discuss the concept of a social support network and how it might also be a part of fandom’s role in modern society. Firstly, however, I must clarify that when I refer to a social support network, I am not referring to social media technologies by another name but to what Peter D’Abbs tells us is an older and specific type of human social behaviour. In the pre-digital era, a social support network is defined as a specific series of relationships between individuals, forming a mutual support web, an emotional circuit board (5). These support webs have a massive influence over the mental health of the individuals in the network. This influence can have either a positive effect, by helping improve the individual’s mental state, or a negative effect, endangering the mental health of the individual. The effects of these interpersonal linkages on the individual can be most readily observed during what D’Abbs calls ‘Stress Events’, as these are times that an individual is most reliant on the assistance that can be provided by the other nodes of the network (9-10).

D’Abbs defines ‘Stress events’ as any and all activities, events or incidents that will cause mental strain or emotional harm to an individual, ranging from mundane everyday stress-inducing activities of work or school, right up to major crises such as the death of a loved one or natural disasters. The extent to which such events will negatively effect an individual’s mental and emotional state not only depends on the severity of the event but the quality of the support they receive from their support network. If they receive positive support then the damage will be minimised, however if their network consists of nodes that only provide a negative influence, the impact of the stress event can be multiplied (D’Abbs 10).
Social support networks are defined by three basic functions, which allow the individual nodes to improve their own mental health as well as the mental well-being of all the nodes. Firstly, the network helps individuals effectively utilise not only their own mental reserves but the positive emotional capital of the other individuals in the network as well. Secondly, interpersonal communications and interactions between the individuals of the network allows for the sharing of the emotional load of stress events across the whole network, reducing the overall strain on any one individual. Thirdly, the exchange of material goods and services in the physical plane (such as money, food or a place to stay), in addition to emotional support, also assists in counteracting the effects on the individual caused by the stress events (D’Abbs 9-10).

Thinking about social support networks in terms of fandoms, the individual fans create the nodes of the network and the linkages of the network are initiated by the shared love of the nodes for the same source material that is within the nodes. These initial links are built upon and improved by communication and interaction between the individual fans, and as fellow fans become friends so the linkages grow stronger. These links are fostered and nurtured not only on the physical plane but on the digital one as well, via fan sites, forums, message boards and social media technologies such as Facebook and Tumblr.

Fandom can provide the benefits of a social support network in a number of ways, in addition to those I have described thus far. Fandoms, and their media texts, are able to provide relief and escape from the stress events and crises affecting the individual. Many of the fans that I interviewed attest to this. By creating a temporary separation between the stress and the individual with a distraction, such as a discussion of favourite episodes, the individual can return to his or her real world duties refreshed and better equipped to handle the weight of the stress events that previously challenged them. The communities that develop from fandoms are thus capable of developing to a stage where the individual members are good enough friends that they can provide emotional support to one another during times of crisis. In some cases the fans even providing financial and material support to one another even though the only thing that actually brings
them together is a shared love of a source text, such as the *Transformers* franchise.

I explore and convey the concept of fandom as a social support network in my documentary project by using a number of examples. The first example is the *Star Wars* costuming fan group the 501st Legion, who in addition to enjoying the *Star Wars* universe together, use the costumes and love of the franchise to put on charity events and raise money for worthy causes. They essentially use fandom for the betterment of the rest of society, as well as to create their own unique pieces of merchandise, such as commemorative clothing patches, to raise money to assist members of their own club through difficult times. The second example I use is that of the *Transformers* fan and action figure customiser Demetrius Massey. Massey's family, home and livelihood were threatened by massive wildfires, the results of which made him come to the decision to get his family to safety. He needed money to do this so he started selling off his *Transformers* collection and his business. Upon hearing his plight the *Transformers* fandom mobilised to aid him. They setup a Facebook group in his honour so they could deliver him well wishes, donate *Transformers* figures to him to use as he needed, hold a charity auction, offer financial support, and even offer him and his family a place to stay until they got back on their feet.

In addition to my research and the production of my film, I also have my own experiences as a near life long *Transformers* fan that I can provide as evidence to support my theories. During high school and much of my undergraduate degree I would go to the many *Transformers* Facebook groups and fan sites, to chat to fellow fans in order to relieve and or find escape from my own stress, as well as returning the favour by helping my fellow fans through their own stress events. The other major example from my own life is my experiences with the fandom while I was making my film project, as without the support and input from the *Transformers* fan community I would not have been able to find a great deal of my evidence or been able to film much of the footage I used to make my film.

Taking this evidence into account we can conclude that the *Transformers* fandom, and others like it, can be considered to be effective social support networks, or at
the very least offer significant linkages in a fan’s existing support networks. Many fans have testified that their fandom often feels like a second family to them. In fact, during the pre-production research and production phases of my filmmaking process I discovered a great many examples of groups of fans and fandoms acting in this way. This willingness to assist each other and give back to the wider community leads me to the possibility that fandoms could also possess a guidance function, similar to that offered by religion, and that the role of fandoms could be similar to that of religion. As Matt Hill states in *Fan Culture*, ‘while religion and fandom are arguably different realms of meaning, they are both centred around acts of devotion, which may create similarities of experience’ (118). It follows then, that there are a number of common elements between religion and some fandoms such as the *Transformers* fandom. These elements include basic values, such as charity and forgiveness, a similar purpose to promote good will to humanity, the services they provide to their followers such as support, counsel and hope, and the same problems they encounter in contemporary society, for example radical elements, persecution and stigmatisation (121).

One of the most important functions of religion is its ‘guidance function’ — its ability to provide an individual with hope and support and direction in times of need — and the power to deal with moral and ethical dilemmas. This is a function that religion shares with some fandoms. Religion and fandoms are able to accomplish this by effectively utilising the power of narratives. All religions use stories, fables, parables and the like to communicate their messages to their followers, in fact many of the greatest and most enduring stories in history come from the holy texts of the world’s major religions (Wonderly 6-8). In a similar way, fandoms, like the *Transformers* fandom, are groups of individuals brought together by powerful narratives, and through discussion they build upon those narratives, while individual fans are shaped by the moral messages embedded within those same narratives (Hill 117).

In one sense, religion can be viewed as a ‘tissue of fictions, conventions, games, and ad hoc rules, which our ancestors agreed to’ and have been passed down over the centuries (Price 46-47). In the case of fandom, instead of the guiding narratives being the parables and stories from sacred scripture that communicate
the moral and ethical codes of religion, it is instead moral dilemmas in the narratives of the comics, cartoons and other cultural texts that the fandoms are based on. In other words, the only real difference between the moral narratives of religion and the Transformers is that instead of stories of angels and demons, saints and sinners, Transformers is based on stories of giant ‘autonomous robotic organisms’ from the planet Cybertron (Wonderly 6-8).

Fandoms are, of course, not completely the same as religion. As Hill states, one of the main differences between fandom and religious discourse is that in ‘fan cultures non-religiosity occurs as an effect of fan discourse and practices, rather than relying on preceding essence/ontology of religion and its supposed functions in society’ (Hill 119). In terms of fandom, these core elements are simply by-products of the fandom community development, as opposed to religion where these core elements are the deliberate foundation of their organisations.

**Fandom as Third Place**

The third place is a concept developed by Ray Oldenburg, and describes a way of classifying the various places that humans inhabit. He describes the first place as one’s home, where one goes to relax and be separate from the rest of the world. This is also referred to one’s ‘private sphere’. The second place exists in the ‘public sphere’, and is comprised of locations where we must go in order to survive and function in society, such as school, work, doctors, food shopping and so on. On the other hand, the third place is a space that is separate but linked to the first and second places ‘a liminal world, a stage between the private and the public spheres of life’ (Morris 38). The third place exists on neutral ground and is a place that we want to go to by choice, and it is where we go to socialise and enjoy ourselves. Apart from this basic definition there are a number of other defining aspects.

The third place can be considered a “home away from home”. It has a similar function and can provide psychological support like a home, even though in many ways it is very different from a home. The third place is a place with a relatively “playful” unserious atmosphere, where individuals regularly come together to
partake in social interactions, such as conversation and the sharing of ideas and this results in the building of a community spirit. In addition to this, third places are characterised as being easily accessible, inexpensive to attend and often provide refreshment and food to their patrons (Cooley, Malaby and Stack 11).

Oldenburg’s original theory used the European cafes and piazzas as examples of third places, but since then the concept has been applied, at least in part, to a number of other locations such as bars, pubs and university common rooms and computer labs, as well as to more abstract concepts like the Australian drinking culture (33-34). It seems logical then, that the concept can be effectively applied to fandoms.

The nature and purpose of the third place is very similar to how one would describe the nature of a fandom. In fandom, individual fans come together to socialise and relax. The cultural texts and the love the fans have for them become the neutral ground and social equaliser. This mutual ground enables fans, who hail from all walks of life, to interact with each other. Like other examples of the third place, it is these discussions and conversations that allow the sense of camaraderie, kinship, friendship and community to develop amongst the fans. In the virtual world the use of new media technologies allows the third place to be accessible not only at any time, but also from a fan’s first or second place. Rather than the physical location being the equalising force, it is the content of discussion, such as the latest issue of the Transformers comic, that provides the common ground.

As a physical third place fandom exists like any other third place. The only difference is locations such as comic book and specialty stores, events such as collector fairs and ‘fan meet ups’ take the place of cafes and bars as the primary locations for third place interactions, as well as the topic of discussion being the common ground. The fan convention perfectly demonstrates every aspect of the concept of fandom as the third place. This is due to the fact that all the elements of the third place that I have describe are present at the fan convention.
The official fan convention for the *Transformers* fandom is Bot-Con which has been run by the fans in one form or another since 1994, and is currently hosted by the *Official Transformers Collector Club*. Each year representatives from all the companies involved with the creation of the transformers toys, comics, cartoons, movies and games present exhibits and host Q&A panels to promote their new products. Actors and voice actors from the TV shows and movies hold autograph sessions, discussion panels and sometimes live radio plays to excite and entertain the crowd. The dealers’ room provides access to a huge variety of rare and exotic action figures and other accessories and products, both official and fan made. The organisers hold workshops on comic drawing, figure customisation, repair and care, and fan fiction writing. Bot-Con is also a place for die-hard fans to show off their impressive transformers theme tattoos and body art, as well as some of the most intricate and well-designed costumes, some of which are even capable of “transformation”. The biggest draw card each year however is the limited edition convention exclusive action figure and comic box sets (Hidalgo 75).

Unfortunately, I was unable to film at Bot-Con, instead I was able to film at five different conventions across Australia in order to properly capture the essence of these events and demonstrate the attendee experience to my audience. To demonstrate the rest of the third place concept in my film I decided to use the footage I shot in Las Vegas in the sequence because the city is an excellent example of the third place existing on a large scale. The city can be considered, on one level, to be the USA’s national third place. I close the sequence with the footage I obtained at the conventions as, to me, the cultural ‘weight’ of fan conventions captures the sheer scale of fandoms in today’s society.
CONCLUSION

As a self confessed nerd and member of a number of fandoms, in particular the Transformers fandom of which I have been a near life long member, I wanted to discover more about my fandoms, and fandoms in general. I wanted to know their histories and how they develop, I wanted to understand the structure of fandom. In particular I wanted to uncover the relationships and linkages between the various aspects, such as the cultural products and the fan’s social interactions with other fans, content producers and non-fans. I decided that the best way to explore this would be through the process of making a documentary film, in addition to a written dissertation.

In short, the aim of both the film and the written component of the project were to answer my primary research question — what is the nature and role of fandom in contemporary society?

I started this dissertation by explaining the term fandom, and then described the Transformers brand and the associated fandom. I went on to discuss how the concepts of identity formation, community, social support networks, religion and the third place could play a part in defining the role of fandom in today’s society, using my film We’ve Got The Touch: The Fandom in Disguise and personal experiences as a life long Trans-fan to contextualise my arguments. At the end of this process I determined that it is a combination of all these phenomena that defines fandom’s complex role in society, and that is to provide individuals with something more meaningful in their lives — meaning that they would otherwise lack.

However I do not believe that this is the full extent of fandom’s influence in today’s world — I believe that when it comes to fandoms I have shown that there is most definitely ‘more than meets the eye’.
APPENDIX ONE (1)

Honours Copyright and Credits

The following is a declaration form, in which I agree that Murdoch University, as my production house, holds the Production Copyright of this (my) Honours production project.
HONOURS COPYRIGHT AND CREDITS
(for Production-based Honours)

Credits: The copyright associated with the practical component of your Honours Program consists of a range of individual rights and obligations. Intellectual rights are indicated in your production credits. You have a legal, professional, academic and moral obligation to properly credit everyone that contributes to your production. This is especially important if your crew includes students who are being assessed for their work in another unit or as an ISC project. Please note that your supervisor will be the final arbiter of your production credits.

Copyright agreement: When a production is made by a group of individuals (and institutions), these rights and obligations potentially overlap and compete with one another. The existing Copyright Act provides for the participating group members to come to a mutual arrangement regarding copyright ownership and in a way that avoids competing copyright claims.

For this reason it is the condition of your Honours Program that you abide by the copyright rules and Delivery Items Specifications, which are described below.

Producer/ Executive Producer: If Murdoch University is the primary provider of your production resources/equipment then Murdoch University is your “Production House”. Your supervisor is your Producer/ Executive Producer. This condition is also necessary because Murdoch’s status as an educational and training institution enables you to circumvent many craft, legal and equity obligations which would otherwise have to be met (Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance conditions, minimal craft payments, crew contracts, safety clearances, crew and client obligations and covers, superannuation, leave loading, errors and omissions cover, completion guarantees, etc).

In these circumstances your production comes into existence and can be exhibited only if Murdoch University holds the copyright on all materials produced.

You should indicate this by the following production credits:

“This production is presented as part of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Media with Honours at Murdoch University”, followed by [Year of submission], [name of your Executive Producer] (i.e. your Supervisor), then followed by “Copyright Murdoch University 2012”.

Alternatively, if you are a Screen Production student and wish to project an up-market “industry image” you can credit your supervisor as the Executive Producer with your other credits followed by “Copyright National Academy of Screen and Sound 2012”. National Academy of Screen and Sound logo will
be made available to you during the editing stage of your project for this purpose.

While we encourage outside contacts and community participation in your productions, students cannot enter into any external production arrangements if it prejudices Murdoch’s copyright claims on any of the material produced in this unit.

If in your production you plan to have a substantial input of funds from outside institutions and funding bodies you should discuss this matter with your supervisor(s) before you undertake your production. In such instances it may be possible to negotiate a copyright arrangement that is satisfactory to everyone.

**Clearances:** It is essential that you are aware that all images, sound, performances and digital content in your production are potentially subject to copyright laws and that it may be illegal to incorporate these in your production without the written permission of the copyright holders. Copyright clearances must be obtained for all images, sounds, locations and participants that appear in your production.

**Exhibition:** Murdoch will exhibit your production as appropriate. If you wish to exhibit your group’s production in a specific festival you will need to seek permission from your supervisor/Executive Producer. Furthermore in all publicity associated with the exhibition of your group’s production, Murdoch University must be registered as the Producer. Please note that your supervisor/Executive Producer will be the final arbitrator of where the production will be exhibited and only after all copyright conditions have been met. Your supervisor will also be the final arbitrator as to who will receive any prizes and awards although in most cases this will be self evident from your production credits.

**Associate Producer:** While we want to protect Murdoch’s copyright we also wish for you to take as much credit as possible for your group production and to represent Murdoch in all festivals and other such ceremonies when appropriate. In this context all students will be considered as Associate Producers and will be given temporary producer’s rights as deemed appropriate by your supervisor for festival and festival awards purposes.

---

I have read all the above-mentioned conditions and agree to abide by them.

**Full Name:**

(PLEASE PRINT)

**Signature:**

Date:
APPENDIX TWO (2)

Archival Reports (Credits)

The following is the completed Archival Report for the completed honours film.
DELIVERY ITEMS/ ARCHIVAL REPORT – CREDITS:

The Master Copy of your production must be delivered to Murdoch’s
archive (held by TSU) before your dissertation will be assessed. Your
production and your production credits cannot be changed again after this
delivery date without the written permission of your Supervisor/ Executive
Producer.

All matters pertaining to copyright and credits are to be included in a
separate (A4) report entitled “Archival Report”. This Report is to be given to
your supervisor and it should include:

- A short synopsis
- A full list of credits indicating the exact form that these appear in your
  production.
- On a separate page, a signed DECLARATION by the student as
  follows:

  “I declare that I have obtained clearances and have (written)
  permissions to use all images and sounds that appear in this
  production”

- On a separate page, a signed DECLARATION by the student as
  follows:

  “For the purposes of festival awards I agreed to represent Murdoch
  University as an ASSOCIATE PRODUCER for this production:”

I have read all the above-mentioned conditions and agree to abide by them.

Full Name: ____________________________

(PLEASE PRINT)

Signature: ____________________________

Date: ____________________________
Synopsis

*We’ve Got The Touch: The Fandom In Disguise* is a documentary film that intends to investigate the role of fan communities, or fandoms, in contemporary society, by focusing on the experiences of the ‘Trans-Fans’ — individuals who are fans of the long running *Transformers* toy brand created by Hasbro in 1984.

The film follows the story of Ryan Meakins, a life-long *Transformers* Fan himself, and his quest to discover the role of fandom in contemporary society. Armed with the latest in academic research and a camera he sets off, travelling across two continents, to find his fellow *Transformers* fans, and with their help he explores what it means to be a fan in today’s society, the joys of the fan convention and what brands like the *Transformers* can teach us about being human and having an identity that makes us part of a community.
Full Credits

Directed and Written
Ryan James Meakins

Executive Producer
Melanie Rodriga

Associate Producers
Bernadette Meakins
Terrence Alan Meakins

Cinematographer
Ryan J. Meakins
Meredith Lindsey

Camera Operators
Ryan J. Meakins
Meredith Lindsey
Bernadette Meakins
Amber Spowart
Hope Corrigan

Sound Recorders
Ryan Meakins
Tim Whitingstall
Amber Spowart

Assistant to the director
Amber Spowart

Editing
Ryan J. Meakins

Copyright Consultant
Kate Makowiecka
### Convention Liaisons
- Stephen Griffiths (Swancon)
- Lionel Midford (supanova)
- Meagan Hinkely-Haynes (wai-con)
- Georgie Carroll (OzComic-con)

### Original Artwork
- Stefanie Palladino
- Dean Lovett

### Featured Interviewees
- Thomas D. Moore
- Demetrius Massey
- Elley Speake
- Michael Alex Kawa
- Paul Eiding
- Neil Kaplan
- Emily Smith
- Andrew Sorohan
- Mark M Auliffe
- Michael Theodore Archdeacon
- Steve Dillon (Thor Odinson)
- Greg Tangey (Tony’ Stark)
- Geraldine Di Mambro
- Sally Avenell
- Stefanie Palladino
Music

*The Touch* - Stan Bush

*Death of Optimus Prime* - Vince DiCole,

*The Transformers (Theme)* - Lion

*Dare to be Stupid* - Weird Al Yankovic

*Autobot/ Decepticon Battle* - Vince DiCole

*Nothin’s Gonna Stand in Our Way* – Spectre General

Special thanks

A special thanks to everyone who had a hand, or servo, in making this documentary possible

Copyright statement

Transformers toys, characters, logos are trademarks of Hasbro Inc and Takara Tomy.

This documentary is a student/fan production and no profits were made from, during or after its production.
Full List of Convention Interviewees

**SWANCON PERTH 2013**
- Tim Thomas
- Danny Oz
- Stephen Griffiths
- Stepign Dedman
- Catherine Cupitt
- Chris Coman
- Mihela Maria Perkovic
- John Birmingham
- Kaneda Cruz
- Charles Stross
- Jon Hayward
- Shelly McCaw
- Alastair Irvine
- Gail Simmon

**SUPERNOVA GOLD COAST 2013**
- Christina Amundson
- Renee Burniak
- Sean Massy
- Emile Burgess
- Amanda Cook
- Jarrah Brouwer
- Russel Harrison
- Hugh Gibson
- Annette Spierings
- Sam Bowman
- Justin Bowman
- Casic Buoe
- Lisa Franklin
- Alois Yates

**SUPANOVA PERTH 2013**
- Mark M Auliffe
- Terry Dove / Dowe
- Michael Theodore Archdeacon
- Zeke Weddell
- Stefanie Palladino
- James Sims
- Steve Dillon
- “Thor Odinson”
- Greg Tangey
- “Anthony ‘Tony’ Stark”
- Christine Bluett
- Geraldine Di Mambro
- Sharon Bluett
- Sally Avenell

**OZ COMIC CON 2014**
- Andrea F. Biondo
- Kai Biondo
- Isaac Biondo
- Jack Cooper
- Geraldine Di Mambro
- Amber Spowart
Copyright Declaration

I (Ryan James Meakins) declare that I have obtained clearances and have (written) permission to use all the images and sounds that appear in this production.

Signature: ___________________________

Date: ___ / ___ / _____

IMPORTANT NOTE:
As of this time, Hasbro Inc. has not provided proper copyright clearance for the use of their trademark products, and as such this film can only be used for Educational Examination purposes only. Until such time as this situation is rectified

Signature: ___________________________

Date: ___ / ___ / _____
Declaration

For the purpose of festival awards, I (Ryan James Meakins) agreed to represent Murdoch University as an ASSOCIATE PRODUCER for this production.

Signature: ___________________________

Date: ___ / ___ / ______
REFERENCES


