

Crashing the World of Kurt Vonnegut: Fanfiction as Adaptation

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This paper offers both a critical analysis and personal account of Amazon.com fanfiction platform, “The World of Kurt Vonnegut” (TWOVKV). Launched in 2013, the platform quickly drew critical scorn for facilitating the sale of licensed fanfiction based on Vonnegut’s work. Almost four years and dozens of stories later, it is now possible to give a more considered evaluation of the project. For while TWOVKV has never become a true fanfiction community, it is suggestive of how fanfiction, like other forms of adaptation, is a significant means through which literary texts remain relevant. If we, as Vonnegut scholars, want his work to continue to be read and to be influential, fanfiction is one of the ways that should happen.

Amazon.com’s Kindle Worlds is a digital-only platform that focuses on publishing and selling licensed fanfiction that can be read on Kindle readers or on devices with the Kindle app. When this project began in 2013 with about a dozen fanfiction “worlds,” one of the most touted properties was “The World of Kurt Vonnegut.” Under a licensing agreement with the literary estate of Kurt Vonnegut, it became possible for fans to write and legally sell fanfiction using copyrighted characters and elements of Kurt Vonnegut’s fiction. If you are unfamiliar with this concept, it means that individuals can choose to publish works that continue the narrative of “Harrison Bergeron” past its original ending or develop a story from the perspective of a minor character in *Slaughterhouse-Five* or write one of the unwritten Kilgore Trout novels summarized in several of Vonnegut’s books. As part of the initial promotional push, Amazon arranged for Hugh Howey, author of the

popular science fiction *Silo* series, to publish his own Vonnegut fanfiction, and Howey published "Peace in Amber," a narrative that combined Howey's personal experience of 9/11 with a retelling of episodes of *Slaughterhouse-Five* from the perspective of Montana Wildback. That said, TWoKV was then, and remains now, an odd inclusion in Kindle Worlds, which focuses less on literary work than on popular genre fiction series such as *The Vampire Diaries*, *Gossip Girl*, and *The Foreworld Saga*.

For some, Vonnegut's inclusion among such texts was an outrage. One critic blasted Amazon for "tarnishing the works of one of America's greatest authors...because while someone might write a *Vampire Diaries* story as good as the original *Vampire Diaries* author, there is no goddamned way anyone is going to write a story starring Kurt Vonnegut's characters as well as Vonnegut did." (Brickin) Another critic referred to the undertaking as "A little gross and unseemly, perhaps? Is there not a difference between the product of *Pretty Little Liars* and the art of Kurt Vonnegut?" (Warner)

This type of critique is a familiar one, but it merits some unpacking. It is easy to disparage fanfiction from a modernist perspective that views primary texts as sources of originality, particularly if they are created by a recognized artist rather than by an amateur. From this point of view, fanfiction or any work of adaptation is necessarily inferior, as it is dependent upon a source text and, by definition, not a wholly original creation. However, the postmodern understanding of the creative process as intertextual in nature allows us to value fanfiction differently, to see such stories not as a debasement of source texts but as responses to and analyses of source texts by other means. From that vantage point, a work

of fanfiction is not necessarily superior or inferior to a source text. And, of course, any number of “original” works, including perhaps every play by Shakespeare, can be seen to depend on other sources for inspiration. Overall, one should think twice before rejecting fanfiction out of hand.

Nor is the inclusion of Kurt Vonnegut among the Kindle Worlds such an arbitrary decision. During Vonnegut’s lifetime, many writers were inspired by his conversational prose style and his metafictional use of autobiographical details. Arguably the first Vonnegut fan fiction was the novel *Venus on the Half-Shell*, a Vonnegut-approved work purportedly by Kilgore Trout (though actually penned by the author Philip José Farmer, with whom Vonnegut later had a falling out). (Shields 323). Less well known but equally interesting is the fact that a number of writers (I have found seven to date), including such well known figures as John Irving, Joseph Heller, and Terry Southern published fictional works that featured a character named “Kurt Vonnegut,” inspired no doubt by Vonnegut’s fictionalization of himself in works like *Slaughterhouse-Five* (O’Loughlin). However, these fanfiction-type publications were produced individually, not as part of a connected group of Vonnegut fans.

That distinction is important because, unlike well-established fanfiction realms such as *A03* or *fanfiction.net* where writers freely share unlicensed fanfiction about works such as *Star Trek*, *Harry Potter*, and *Twilight*, TWoKV cannot be said to function as a full-fledged fanfiction community, a critique that applies generally to Kindle Worlds. As Daniela Ini writes, “distribution systems such as *Kindle Worlds* promote an individualistic way of

producing [fanfiction].” This can particularly be seen when comparing the relatively slight “Comments” sections in *Kindle Worlds*, which tend to offer advice for readers about completed stories as opposed to the more expansive Comments sections in more traditional fanfiction communities, which are directed to writers who may continue to revise and improve their fanfiction. (Ini) However, what TWoKV does offer, for critics as well as writers, is a trove of responses to Vonnegut’s work that show not only which of Vonnegut’s writings have proven enduring but what elements of his fiction continue to compel readers.

So, while TWoKV has many of the surface qualities of a fanfiction community, in practice it has become something different, and for the rest of this paper I want to explore that difference, less as a critic than as a participant and as someone who has used the world for reasons other than those which were intended. Since TWoKV began, I have incorporated it into creative writing classes I have taught, using it to give many students their first publication opportunity and, somewhat ironically considering fanfiction’s reputation for poor editing, taking it on as a real-world model for professional manuscript expectations. Additionally, I have written and published Vonnegut fanfiction alongside my students, and in doing so I have gained some insights about the connections between critical and creative work.

But, first let me lay out the mechanics of how this has worked in an intermediate undergraduate fiction writing class that I teach. The semester begins with students reading and responding to a range of contemporary fiction. For example, after finishing Karen

Russell's story "St. Lucy's School for Girls Raised by Wolves" students then write a sketch that combines supernatural and realistic elements but treats the supernatural elements as normal and the realistic elements as unusual. These are not exactly fanfiction sketches but closer to the "mentor text" model used in secondary school teaching. However, these exercises lead up to the next section of the class where students read some of Vonnegut's short fiction followed by *Slaughterhouse-Five*. I aim to have students read these works less with a focus on meaning (as would be the case in a literature class) than with a focus on effects and how Vonnegut creates them. Here, as well, students engage in mentor text exercises, though some of these are closer to fan fiction, as when I ask students to sketch out a Tralfamadorian-style novel, as that genre is described to Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

After that, I ask students to purchase and read two works of Vonnegut fan fiction from the World of Kurt Vonnegut. The whole class reads the previously mentioned "Peace in Amber" by Hugh Howey, and I ask students to individually choose another simply by scrolling through the offerings on Amazon or considering work done by my students in previous semesters. With those experiences, students then begin work on their own fanfiction draft that meets the requirements set by Kindle World and the unwritten rules of fanfiction. This is a hard assignment for students. Kindle World stories are required to be at least 5000 words (about 16-20 manuscript pages) and they have specific rules as to how copyrighted elements in the World of Kurt Vonnegut can be used (for instance, it is a violation of terms to have a "crossover" using copyright-protected elements from another writer's work). There also are challenges when students write historical fiction set in the

time during which Vonnegut wrote. Some of these are small (a character cannot make a 9-1-1 call to police in the late 1960s, for example), but others loom large, such as capturing the sensibility and subjectivity of a Nazi soldier at the end of WWII. Additionally, writers need to follow the conventions of fan fiction in that their plots cannot directly contradict anything that happens in their source text.

This is a lot to take on, particularly for students who may not have been familiar with Vonnegut's work before this semester (and sometimes are not "fans" of his work). I meet with all students individually about this project and review drafts before students consider publishing them. Recently, I have begun working with a colleague who teaches an editing class, and my fiction writing students have been paired up with her editors to revise and fine-tune these stories. This had allowed students to get detailed responses more quickly, and it has had the benefit of giving my students an introduction to the writer-editor relationship. In the end, though all students have to produce a story that meets the Kindle World guidelines, I make the publication of stories optional, and typically it is only the most motivated students with the strongest stories who actually choose to publish. The stakes are higher because students understand that they may be writing for an actual audience beyond their professor, and therefore many students devote themselves to producing the best work of which they are capable. And some of these fanfiction stories are among the strongest works of fiction I've ever had in my classes. SEE HANDOUT.

As I mentioned earlier, I have also gone through this process with my students. To date, I've published four works of fanfiction, trying to play with the possibilities of the form.

“What Valencia Knew” makes Billy Pilgrim’s wife, Valencia, the protagonist of the events of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. This reorientation leads to a plot that both conforms to and expands upon Vonnegut’s narrative. “EPiCAD 2025” is a reboot that takes the structure of Vonnegut’s story “EPICAC” and transports it from the dawn of the computer era to a near-future in which artificial intelligence breakthroughs transform our world. My story “William Henry Harrison Bergeron: A Mashup” should be illegal for how it works with the text of Vonnegut’s story “Harrison Bergeron,” like mashups such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. If there’s time later, I’ll be glad to talk about how I tricked Amazon.com into allowing me to use a *Timequake*-like disruption to combine Vonnegut’s story with elements from the life of the 7th U. S. President. Finally, I most recently published “I Need a Miracle,” which falls into the category of “parallel fiction” in that it is a largely self-sustaining narrative about time travel with only a tangential (though significant) connection to the events of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Next semester, I’m going to take on a Kilgore Trout story.

Aside from pushing me to write a wide range of narratives, this process has also made me appreciate that the writing of fanfiction is only different in degree, rather than in kind, from the work that I have done as a Vonnegut scholar. As Lev Grossman said in his foreword to the collection *fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World*, “Writing and reading fanfiction isn’t just something you do; it’s a way of thinking critically about the media you consume.” In writing a story from the perspective of Valencia Pilgrim I was confronting my discomfort with Vonnegut’s one-dimensional portrayal of her in what is otherwise one of my favorite books. In rebooting “EPICAC,” I was teasing out of that story

its continued relevance to contemporary readers despite having the seemingly-dated subject of a room-sized computer.

And I have seen similar responses in my students. Those who are already familiar with Vonnegut's work become more engaged by it. Writing a good work of fanfiction requires writers to give serious, sometimes obsessive, consideration to their source texts. In that way, a good work of fanfiction can be as intellectually complex as a good critical paper. In fact, as my early reference to the secondary teaching technique of "mentor texts" suggests, it is already common practice to combine critical and creative approaches in the classroom. So, I would like to end by arguing that rather than seeing fanfiction as a disparagement of Vonnegut's work, we need to consider that fanfiction may be one of the main means by which his writings can remain vital and influential for a new generation of readers and writers.

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