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Hacking *Xena*: Technological innovation and queer influence in the production of mainstream television

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ABSTRACT

This article is an historical analysis of a period in which early online fandom allowed for significant queer influence on mainstream televisual narratives. I argue that the technological affordances of the internet enabled Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) groups to communicate their desire for queer(ed) content directly to production, leading to queer “hacks” of mainstream entertainment. The introduction of new technologies leads to increased familiarity among previously distanced groups (Marvin, 1988. *When old technologies were new: Thinking about electric communication in the late nineteenth century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press). This is well illustrated in the case of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, a syndicated TV series that aired from 1995–2001. *Xena*’s audience-industry co-production initiated the official reimagining of the possibilities for sexuality and gender in the series. I explore this unique era through analysis of online fan discussions and public statements by production as well as in-depth interviews with fans and two key informants: a 20-year member of the *Xena* fandom and a high-ranking *Xena* executive. I interrogate potentials and limits of the *Xena* hack and demonstrate that the now ubiquitous, commercialized nature of online fandom detracts from queer influences on heteronormative content not specifically marketed as “gay.” This historical arc suggests the presumably empowered queer hack is vulnerable to the technological hegemony traditionally imposed on marginalized groups.

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On a Monday evening in May 1999, fans of the TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess* logged onto AOL “XenaChat” and discussed upcoming episodes, lesbian subtext, and other hot fan topics of the day (AUSXIP, 2014).¹ The fans were especially excited about one chat participant’s presence: Tyldus. Tyldus was, as was widely known in *Xena* fan communities, the screen name of *Xena* co-executive producer and writer, Steven Sears, who would regularly visit fan websites, chats, and discussion boards. These casual interactions between producer and fans were forbidden by the studio. Yet Sears and other showrunners, production personnel, and cast members continued to enjoy a close-knit relationship with online *Xena* fan communities.

This article offers historical analysis of a period in which relatively early online fan activity allowed for significant queer audience influence on mainstream televisual narratives. I argue that the technological affordances of online fan communities enabled Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) groups to communicate their desire for alternative narratives directly to producers in an era in which new technologies allowed for “queer hacks” of mainstream entertainment content. The introduction of new technologies leads to the alteration of established social boundaries, increasing contact and familiarity among previously distanced groups (Marvin, 1988). This is well illustrated in the case of the *Xena: Warrior Princess* (hereafter *X:WP*) fandom. *X:WP* was a syndicated TV fantasy series that aired from 1995–2001. It chronicled the adventures of an ancient Greek warrior, Xena, her path from violent warlord to redemption as a warrior for good, and her growing relationship with her sidekick, Gabrielle. Very quickly, *X:WP* became a cult hit and the highest rated series in first-run syndication.

Part of *X:WP*'s explosive growth was due to Xena's adoption by many viewers as both feminist and lesbian icon. Fans pored over details of the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle, insisting there was a romantic subtext to their interactions, rare in the mid-1990s when LGBTQ TV characters were scarce and heavily stereotyped. Robin, a longtime fan, told me: “Being a lesbian, you look for anything that you can find that validates your own feelings.” As more viewers felt similar identifications with Xena and Gabrielle, they converged online, creating communities revolving around the series. Hanmer (2014) argued *X:WP* fan fiction communities “allowed many to discover a capacity to embrace forms of lesbianism and different ways of being in the world” (p. 620). Young (2005) noted, “Xena was the first cult hit of the Internet age: the face that launched a thousand Web sites.” These websites soon received attention from *X:WP* personnel who, as they realized fan desires, began playing increasingly openly with the sexual possibilities for Xena and Gabrielle.

This case of fan influence has been identified by scholars (Gwenllian-Jones, 2000; Hamming, 2001; Hanmer, 2014), with Hamming noting consumer identification of lesbian subtexts created unusually participatory relationships between online fan communities and *X:WP* producers. This audience-industry co-production initiated the official re-imagining of the possibilities for the protagonists' gender roles and sexual desires. Textual examples of the queered series abound, from the pregnant protagonist's statement that Gabrielle is the “father” of her child to a transgender character's non-normative gender going largely unremarked throughout an episode. Many celebrated this queering of the originally devised “warrior-babe” *Xena* narrative. However, Hamming (2001) and Silverman (2001) positioned this co-production as exploitation on the part of producers who teased queer storylines without the full realization of a lesbian “maintext.”

With this debate in mind, I contend fans capitalized on the TV industry's lagging response to the mass adoption of the internet, and the resulting upset of social boundaries between producers and audiences, to significantly influence the show's narrative arc to an unprecedented extent. Fan impact led to dramatic changes in *X:WP*'s on-air content, resulting in a queer mainstream text that played with gender and sexuality and showcased women free of distinct gender roles or sexual orientations. Such influence is increasingly difficult to realize as fandom and fan-producer interaction become tightly controlled, commercialized, and commodified (Scott, 2015; Stein, 2011).

I explore *X:WP*'s unique era through analysis of online fan discussions and public statements made by production personnel, as well as in-depth interviews with fans and industry members in person (primarily at the 2015 Official *Xena* Convention) and by phone for follow-up. This varied methodological approach works to consider the ways that production and audience interrelate (Grindstaff, 2002; Radway, 1997). Methodologies for the paper include analysis of publicly available fan and producer narratives; ethnographic approaches of observation and interviewing to study both audiences and industry (Radway, 1997); and an emphasis on interrogating top-down culture (Nader, 1972). The participant sample consisted of 15 interviewees. Each participant is identified by a pseudonym.

Fans and industry were recruited online through *X:WP* fan sites, message boards, and social media as well as in person at the 2015 Official *Xena* Convention. Active and archive fan sites provided historical and contemporary data on fan attitudes and actions as well as public statements made by industry. I blended internet data with offline interviews and observations to identify trends. Interviews with two key informants best represent the data collected for this project and illustrate the distinctive (and blurred) roles of "audience" and "producer" during the *X:WP* era. "Robin" is a technologically savvy, longtime member of the *X:WP* fandom enmeshed in key online fan spaces, and "James" is a high-ranking executive that worked on the series in a creative capacity.

Using these methods, I interrogate *X:WP*'s era and trace the transformation of a mainstream televisual narrative through the perspectives of the "hackers," and "hacked." I argue *X:WP* existed in a historical moment in which TV industry's socio-professional boundaries were vulnerable to attack. With the advent of internet fan communities, aggressive online fan creative productivity, and outright campaigning, *X:WP* personnel began identifying with fans and, as a result, a series originally devised as heteronormative increasingly began to be read and written as queer. Even though these fan activities were not what we normally consider computer coding attacks, I call these queer advances "hacks" because of their core similarities in intent and disruption of normative systems of power through playful technological tactics deployed in spaces opened up by the industry's weaknesses in the face of innovation. These hacks also included setbacks and limitations that further inform an understanding of future technological potentials in upsetting dominant cultural productions. Throughout this paper, I differentiate between queerness (which, as understood through queer theory, rejects definitions and binaries in relation to gender and sexuality), and those who identify as (LGBTQ) individuals or communities.

Queer hacks and internet fandom

This article examines how social identities and distances were negotiated at the intersection of one extant technology, television, and a new, exploding innovation: the internet. Television's personal and communal aspects invited forms of "tele-participation" (Ross, 2008) made more feasible with computer and internet technologies. Major innovations in technology disrupt the social norms of everyday life (Cowan, 1985; Douglas, 1987; Marvin, 1988). Specifically, Marvin (1988) argued that the introduction of new technologies leads to the alteration of established social boundaries, momentarily increasing contact and familiarity among hierarchically distanced groups.

The internet disrupted social norms through its rapidly evolving definitions of community. Boyd (2011) explains: “networked technologies reorganize how information flows and how people interact with information and each other” (p. 41). Indeed, the very architecture of the internet is tangled inevitably with the social (Lessig, 2006). In 1993, Rheingold proposed that virtual communities held unheard-of social-political potential, but worried about media conglomerates seeking to control new technological media. Bryson (2004) noted the Internet’s significance as “a contemporary site of cultural transformation, identification and community participation, as well as a means of access to and production of capital” (p. 239).

Queer theory, informed by Foucauldian (1980, 1995) notions of power, opposes binary conceptions of gender and sexuality, instead focusing on performativity and discourse (Butler, 1999; Sedgwick, 1990). I deploy queer theory to locate tactics that pursue queer potentialities. Queer tactics are frequently embedded in the socio-technological. As Ashford (2009) notes, “Technology heightens our awareness of the fluidity of identity as never before” (p. 310). Halberstam’s (2011) conception of queer theory illustrates the visceral intersections of the technological and the queer:

I believe in low theory in popular places, in the small, the inconsequential, the antimemorial, the micro, the irrelevant; I believe in making a difference by thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely. I seek to provoke, annoy, bother, irritate, and amuse; I am chasing small projects, micropolitics, hunches, whims, fancies. (p. 21)

Halberstam’s micro-work at queering suggests tinkering, a kind of trial and error endemic of the technological process of bits upon bits, networks upon networks that characterizes the Information Age. Keeling (2014) proposed “Queer OS” to name scholarly/political projects that

... take historical, sociocultural, conceptual phenomena that currently shape our realities in deep and profound ways ... to be mutually constitutive with sexuality and with media and information technologies, thereby making it impossible to think of them in isolation. (p. 153)

Queer OS works are located where queer theory intersects with new media studies and technology studies (Keeling, 2014). I situate this analysis at such an intersection.

Queer theory and the technological hack are especially aligned through their shared emphasis on “troubling.” Light (2011) explains: “Queering is problematizing apparently structural and foundational relationships with critical intent, and it may involve mischief and clowning as much as serious critique” (p. 432). Similarly, hackers work outside the official limits and infrastructure of the web. Stallman (2014) classifies hacking as anything combining “playfulness, cleverness, and exploration ... hacking means exploring the limits of what is possible” (p. 8). Both queer troubling and internet hacking involve tactics that weave in and out of established systems, sometimes chipping away at them, sometimes dramatically shutting them down, and always operating as resistance to official use and normative prescriptions.

De Certeau (1984) defines tactics as “an art of the weak” (p. 37). De Certeau’s tactics are mobile and work in the system’s “wobble room,” allowing users some opening up of space for opposition and subversion. De Certeau (1984) identified the literal meanings of texts to be products of the social elite and positioned readers as potential poachers of the material they consume, regardless of original intent or hegemonic encoding. He deployed Barthes’

description of reading: “that cultivates the desire to write” (p. 176). This desire to (re)write is central to many fan communities and their negotiations of power with media producers.

Fans transform viewing into a cultural activity (Jenkins, 2006). Early fandom studies highlighted fans’ disempowered status in hierarchical power structures of media (Jenkins, 2013) and taste (Fiske, 1992). Baym’s (2000) pioneering work on online fan communities demonstrated that the internet changed what it means to be a fan. Later, Jenkins (2013) argued online fandom could have wider (and perhaps revolutionary) outcomes within dominant culture, but also warned of the corporate media environment: “Allowing consumers to interact with media under controlled circumstances is one thing; allowing them to participate in the production and distribution of cultural goods—on their own terms—is something else altogether” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 133). More recent waves of fan studies sought to critique fan work as unpaid labor (Andrejevic, 2008) and recognize the increasing commodification of fandom (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007). Scott (2008, 2013) demonstrated that as media industries increasingly allow and even invite fan input and labor, such “empowerment” also often constrains and limits fans to contributions that reinforce corporate authority.

These debates within fan studies inform this work, and the topic of study here, the *X:WP* fandom, has often found itself at the center of them (Hamming, 2001; Silverman, 2001). This project locates and historicizes the intersections of fandom with identity, industry, and technology, and captures a nuanced account of the queer possibilities and limitations of an active online fandom. As fan studies scholars parse agency versus hegemony, so do scholars of technology and the internet (Castells, 2009; Light, 2011; Penley & Ross, 1991; Rheingold, 1993). As an historical case study, this project takes seriously Castells’s (2001) claim that “The history of the Internet helps us to understand the paths of its future history-making” (p. 9) and answers Jenkins’s (2013) call to historicize fandom. The historical milieu examined in this project is notable. In 2013, the updated 20th Anniversary Edition of Jenkins’s canonic *Textual Poachers* was published. The year 2014 marked the 25th anniversary of the creation of the World Wide Web. In early 2015, *X:WP* fans celebrated the “20th Anniversary Absolute Last Official *Xena* Convention” in Burbank, California. Fan studies, *X:WP*, and the internet, frequently crisscrossed one another on their journeys.

“The birth of the internet:” Technology/community/identity

Robin precisely located *X:WP* within the history of internet access:

The earlier fandoms, you had people that came together at the conventions, and they would publish fan zines and they’d mail things ... They didn’t really have the same tool that the Internet provided the *Xenaverse*, which was kind of an amazing thing as far as the timing of it. ... The Internet was starting to grow into the World Wide Web. You had a lot of people starting to have more access.

Although conceived of earlier, actual internet-like networks began in 1969 and continued through the 1980s. In 1995, the US government transferred the internet’s management to independent organizations, ushering in the current era of widespread internet use. Home internet use soared during *X:WP*’s peak years from 18% in 1997 to 50.4% in 2001 (File, 2013). RenXen, who runs a major *X:WP* fan site, explained the series went on-air during, “the birth of the Internet.”

Robin initially visited *X:WP* fan sites for screen captures. Subtextual moments Robin *thought* she saw during the live airing or a fuzzy VHS pause, such as a lingering gaze between Gabrielle and Xena, couldn't be validated before this screen-capture technology. Numerous websites utilized the new internet affordances for the creation and curation of thousands of key *X:WP* moments. Robin credits the online accumulation and community-building around such "evidence" as leading to the creation of several fan groups, many that would go on to petition TPTB ("The Powers That Be," fandom's acronym for showrunners) for on-screen, narrative support of their positions.

Many LGBTQ viewers valued using a new technology they felt would ensure anonymity and safety when being outed in "real life" could prove dangerous. AOL provided the first online spaces where *X:WP* fans congregated anonymously. General *X:WP* communities soon spawned numerous subcategories including groups focused on lesbian subtext. However, largely unregulated sites like AOL or the official *X:WP* discussion boards often led to LGBTQ fans feeling bullied and overrun by fans or trolls insisting Xena wasn't gay. For some, building safe community seemed impossible.

Fans writing and consuming "alt" fan fiction especially experienced this isolation. Alt assumed a romantic/sexual relationship between Xena and Gabrielle. Many fan fiction site moderators did not accept alt, so some writers and readers began their own group called Saddlehorn (named after Xena's dildo-shaped saddle horn). The group, formed in 1996 or 1997, was a super-secretive, invite-only, women's-only listserv meant to secure a safe space for members. ("There's a part of me that's like, I'm not sure I should be talking about it now," Robin, who is a former member, told me.) Concurrently, similar online spaces were being embraced by LGBTQ people at record numbers. Gross (2001) quoted the Associated Press as reporting in 1996:

It's the unspoken secret of the online world that gay men and lesbians are among the most avid, loyal and plentiful commercial users of the Internet. On any given evening, one-third of all the member-created chat rooms on America Online are devoted to gay topics. (p. 228)

Penley and Ross (1991) state with the rise of technoculture, "activism ... is no longer a case of putting bodies on the line" (p. xv). With the reduced bodily stakes of disrupting heteronorms, the internet teemed not only with queered media consumption, but also with overwhelming amounts of fan (re)production overall: "the thousands of discussion groups, web sites, and mailing lists populating the Web are only eclipsed in presence by pornography ..." (Gray et al., 2007, p. 7). Thus, the idea of the internet as a culturally innovative and politically promising technology became strongly woven into the social fabric of not only the larger LGBTQ community, but *X:WP* fandom itself.

Internet technology and social distance

Professional boundaries in media and technology are well-documented historically. Although new technologies are promoted as equalizers within society, the economically disadvantaged, women, and ethnic/racial minorities are often excluded and ridiculed for their technological "ignorance" (Marvin, 1988). While amateurs were historically excluded from professional technological spaces (Douglas, 1987), these divides were overcome if the tinkerers were elite (Marvin, 1988). Thus, new technologies often initially offer promises of equality, but can quickly end up reinforcing extant hegemonic power structures (Cowan, 1985).

The *X:WP* moment occupied some of the core years of the widespread proliferation of internet communities and the era facilitated new modes of communication between audiences and producers. In the mid-1990s scholars were increasingly theorizing the internet as a social technology, with Sproull and Faraj (1997) finding it notable that users don't look only for information online, but also "affiliation, support, and affirmation," leading to online interactions that "result in startlingly intimate revelations ..." (p. 38). In the case of *X:WP*, the internet suddenly afforded fans and industry sustained and unexpectedly intimate contact.

Jenkins (2006) noted the advent of the internet blurred the very definitions of "producer" and "audience." According to Boyd (2011),

The affordances of networked publics are fundamentally shaped by the properties of bits, the connection between bits, and the way that bits and networks link people in new ways ... The properties of bits regulate the structure of networked publics, which, in turn, introduces new possible practices and shapes the interactions that take place. (p. 42)

An online photo taken around 1995 features star Renee O'Connor looking in apparent wonder at a *X:WP* AOL chat room on a small computer monitor. This was evidently the first time she and other personnel became aware of online fandom. What once passed for fanatic mobs in the industrial imagination were suddenly, through the internet, distinguishable as individuals. Fans were able to render themselves visible and even hack their stereotypes in the industry by using the internet's affordances for networking, communication, and community.

X:WP personnel frequently describe the revelatory moments that fans' "real life" identities were discovered. James emphasized the difference between *X:WP* fans and those of other franchises: "I like the passion that they have, the love they have, I like the fact they're not the geeky people who dress up in outfits and have no brains except for comic books and genre heroes." James also ascribed merit based on professional identities, once describing a time he, a *X:WP* actor, and fans visited the White House. As the *X:WP* personnel settled into the long line to enter, one of the fans walked up, laughingly asked what they were doing, and led them to another gate, flashing her National Security Agency badge:

And this little group of five Xenites ... were assigned a Secret Service agent who took us on a private tour ... I was like, "Wow, we have a *Xena* fan who's a spook. This is awesome!" These people are just incredibly amazing.

X:WP personnel enjoyed this new interaction with such elite and exciting fans.

Although one could expect the marginalized status of LGBTQ fans might have diminished their respectability in the eyes of *X:WP* personnel, it appears this added to their appeal. My interviews with James and public statements by production point to liberal viewpoints, especially regarding LGBTQ identities. Liz Friedman, an executive producer of *X:WP* and out lesbian, in an interview with *The Advocate*, framed her sexuality as a non-issue on set (Stockwell, 1996). The staff's politics also contributed to their quick decision to (at least partially) support the subtexters' cause. James explained:

... There was a bit of surprise, but actually a little bit of delight ... When we discovered that we were actually providing this to a disenfranchised group that was struggling to find some identification with heroes, we said, you know what? We're not going to spoil that.

Such motivations may sound paternalistic, but did result in the queering of traditional mainstream/LGBTQ power relations in an era where lesbian representation largely existed to titillate, ignite controversy (Gross, 2001), and deny queer politics (Sender, 2004).

Without initially planning to fulfill such exploitative goals, or indeed represent LGBTQ people or non-normative narratives whatsoever, producers inadvertently found themselves consistently queering mainstream TV screens at the behest of some of society's most marginalized groups. And despite the lofty motivations cited by James and other showrunners, the resulting narrative was not a top-down "gift" to marginalized viewers. Intentional and tactical fan-work created *X:WP* as it eventually became known: as queer camp. Once fans knew TPTB were watching their online activities, they used those connections to change the very text of the show. Subtexters' and other factions' online battles were not impotent and inconsequential debates. These sub-groups at least partly worked to exploit their growing (sometimes interpersonal, sometimes anonymous as producers lurked) relationships with showrunners to fulfill their desires on-screen. RenXen explained, "at some point, we knew that the producers and the writers were listening and ... they (the fans) would express themselves." Robin contended that *X:WP* fans knew exactly what they were doing in their interactions with TPTB, claiming they were aware "of the potentiality of the access that was given to them ... Fans are savvy, fans have strategies. They have positions that they stake out and advocate for, there were definitely agendas."

Participants cited various tactics used to push producers to incorporate such agendas. Online chats, message board discussions, letters, messages, and emails were all primary methods used to petition showrunners for changes. Some also cited Whoosh as a respected fan website used to influence *X:WP* personnel. Whoosh took a particularly analytic approach to the series, regularly publishing articles like "Anachronism be D*mned: A XWP Historiography Part V: Biblical References in Xena: Warrior Princess" and "Joxer from a Disability Perspective." Contributors included academics, lawyers, film critics, and other fans interested in creating a semi-scholarly *X:WP* resource. If you were serious about arguing a position, having a thoughtful piece published on Whoosh was the way to get the producers' attention as they were known to frequent the site. A similar fan strategy involved airing concerns to Sharon Delaney, the fan club president. Delaney had regular access to the showrunners and stars and was much-loved by fans for her quiet and persistent support of subtext. Robin called Delaney an "advocate" for subtexters and one of the "inroads" used to influence *X:WP* personnel.

Fans cannily used these and other tactics to "break in" to production offices and mess with the heteronormative "code" created in the writers' rooms and other production spaces of mainstream television production. These offices were considered "very private" by James. He explained that fans couldn't necessarily be trusted "with the room," indicating that the physical story idea board within the writers' room was considered the item most closely guarded from fans. Yet the closeness perpetuated by the spread of the internet left the production offices vulnerable to infiltration, albeit virtual. Fans were savvy with computer and internet tools and deliberately used them to advocate for their positions as production personnel were just discovering they could access thousands of opinions on themselves and their work in seconds. Online interactions with audiences were not yet the domain of marketing and public relations (PR) departments. There was no standardized process of dealing with the internet phenomenon, so fans and

producers alike improvised, using the technology to interact with those on the other side of the screen without the mediators that are often required today. The results of these interactions for *X:WP* fans were frequently considered victories as the physically distant board seemed to display increasing evidence of their own influence.

The potentials and limits of the hack: Queering mainstream sexuality

Though the *X:WP* fandom has been identified as particularly participatory (Gross, 2001; Gwennlian-Jones, 2000; Hamming, 2001; Ross, 2008), scholars remain divided on its queer impact. A textual analysis of the series could produce numerous “queered” moments, from playing with gender to progressive examinations of domestic duties to homoerotic massages. Drawing a line from fans to producers for any example, however, would prove difficult. Thus, to demonstrate the shift in producers’ narrative intent and the resultant queering of the mainstream series, I discuss three major events through which fan influence is often contended: 1) the disappearance of “men of the week,” and introduction of the “soulmate” narrative, 2) public industry acknowledgement of LGBTQ identities and sexual fluidity in a “risky” era, and, 3) the hiring of Missy Good.

Early in *X:WP*, the producers embraced a formulaic structure in which the protagonists regularly encountered romantically viable men. This reversal of the “girl of the week” trope was slightly subversive as often the men urged Xena or Gabrielle to settle down, and the women instead continued their adventures. However, the love interests largely served to affirm the women’s heterosexual availability and desexualize their close relationship. LGBTQ viewers resisted these love interests strongly, understanding their ability to squash queer potentials in the larger *Xena* narrative. As production became aware of the fans’ position, the male suitors gradually disappeared. James agrees this was a direct response to online fans’ queer desires: “The more they grabbed ahold, the more we kind of gave them ... I think that from the perspective of any disenfranchised society, what we were doing is giving them the comfort of acceptance.” Robin characterized the move as showrunners saying, “We’re not going to keep throwing a guy at her as if that’s going to normalize who she is.”

Following the narrative reversal, it was revealed that the protagonists would continually reincarnate and their paths would always be joined. Episodes showed Xena and Gabrielle reincarnated as both men and women, with various platonic and romantic-sexual connections. After these realizations, the duo frequently spoke of their love for one another and openly used the term “soulmate.” Most subtexters embraced this storyline. One fan stated online: “When they made that jump from being ‘best friends’ to ‘soulmates’ that’s when things ceased being just a possible subtextual love affair ...” (Shields, 2000).

Although producers were sometimes criticized for not “outing” Xena, many fans praise them, considering the oppressive environment. When presented with the argument that production only teased LGBTQ fans, everyone interviewed for this project defended the series, citing its era. Hayley, a fan who recently discovered the show on Netflix, stated, “I think they’re very progressive ... that they were willing to do this back then.” Similarly, Robin responded:

I get it ... But ... we’re talking about the late 90s ... You had Ellen, but you were only starting to build the groundswell that has subsequently turned into what we have now. I think they

did give us what we wanted in a lot of ways: ... they were kissing, they were touching, they were saying they loved each other, they were soulmates ... It's kind of like, there wasn't really any other show willing to go even that far.

Subtexters were confident their online power caused these dramatic narrative moves. Fan Ashley explained, "The lesbian community started picking up this show ... saying this is ours, they're writing for us ... And they paid attention to what fans were saying on the Internet."

James described a historical moment with limits for LGBTQ representation and industry concern in the face of new technologies. He remembered the studio forbidding creatives from visiting online fan message boards because of another series soliciting story ideas and putting the studio in a legal bind. "Of course, I promptly ignored it," James said of the rule, which he never saw enforced. *X:WP* creator and Executive Producer Rob Tapert also acknowledged skirting studio policies, publicly stating about interactions with the *Xena* community: "It thrust me into a world that I didn't know existed" (Tobias7, 2007). James and other producers emphasized the show's queered narratives as a political act performed in support of the marginalized fans' desires.

Those interviewed contended that the increasingly overt lesbian dynamics of the series were the result of sincere efforts to please fans and were not ulterior motives driven by marketing or financial profit. Sender (2004) described the lesbian market as a demographic that was "neither fish nor fowl": not as easy to locate as either heterosexual females or gay men, and earning lower incomes as couples than both heterosexual and gay male couples. When marketers did capitalize on the "lesbian chic" aesthetic in the 1990s through the early 2000s, it was meant less to target lesbians than entice heterosexual males (Sender, 2004). James denied that *X:WP* ever played with the characters' sexuality for titillation, claiming, "it wasn't really chic at the time." Robin characterized the (primarily male) showrunners as clueless when it came to purposefully appealing to lesbians, stating that the babe-in-leather series was initially expected to appeal to the same audience as its predecessor, *Hercules*:

They had no idea, they didn't have any comprehension as to how popular the show would become. I don't think they understood what it was about the show that really attracted the lesbians in the first place ... they didn't know what to do with it.

The *X:WP* showrunners' bewilderment is reflective of the era's confusion surrounding the lesbian market.

Still, *X:WP* did appeal to lesbians without any detectable lesbian-targeted marketing campaign (while personnel did interviews with LGBTQ media, I could find no evidence of a wider marketing strategy). Fans and producers often distinguish between how *X:WP* showrunners handled the "lesbian issue" versus a marketing-centric approach. Robin emphasized that once producers caught on to their lesbian fandom, "they could have gone the opposite direction: 'we're going to make sure everyone knows Xena's straight, straight, straight!' ... and it would have been a very different show." Instead, the changes in the text were largely seen to "play" *with* lesbian fans without exploiting lesbian sexuality for male pleasure or studio profits, tendencies many worry about currently while the franchise is being considered for a reboot. In 2008, Sears stated the following regarding what might happen if *X:WP* became a feature film:

As far as the marketing mind is concerned and the studios, if a movie came out they would play with it, they would toy with it, they would try to appeal to the male heterosexual audience, because in their minds that's who's attracted to these kinds of films, these action films ... The horrible thing that might be done is that they would then say, let's go completely commercial with this thing. They would have the characters kiss, have the characters imply that they had a sexual encounter, and then have them realize, well, that was just an experiment. Now let's go back to men. That's the worst possible thing that could happen. But it's also one of the most possible things that marketing could do. (*Bringing Out*, 2008)

With *X:WP*, producers managed to appeal to their surprise audience in quiet but increasingly subversive ways. After all, prior to *X:WP*, the norm for TV series featuring close female relationships was winking acknowledgment of lesbian rumors followed by firm “contain or deflect” strategies to cement the heterosexuality of the regular cast (Doty, 1993). *X:WP* notably did not follow this precedent, and also avoided the fumbling of those trying to sell to a “lesbian market.”

Perhaps nothing told subtexters they were affecting the very text of the show more than the producers' decision to hire well-known alt fan fiction writer Melissa (Missy) Good. James described Tapert's announcement that he wanted to hire a fan scriptwriter: “Now you have to understand that our office, we're very, very fan friendly, but we were also very, very private. And we were worried about fans getting in and trying to get information ... So this was big.” Sears knew Good from online interactions and recommended her to Tapert, who immediately hired her to pen an episode. Pleased with her work, producers soon hired her to write a second episode. Because the showrunners had selected a well-known alt writer, many subtexters felt recognized as literal co-producers.

While the internet allowed *X:WP* personnel to empathize with their audience, long-standing professional boundaries are difficult to dismantle. These divides emerged in public comments made by *X:WP* personnel and in my interviews with James. When discussing Good, James differentiated her from other fans:

One of the big flaws with fans, this was something Missy did not suffer from, ... most of them write fan fiction with the attitude of fixing the problems that they see ... when in fact there's reasons why we do certain things.

Although friendly toward fans, James still considered them amateurs. James' comments also revealed distrust of the internet, which he called “the great multiplier of stupidity:”

The problem is, is that there's a certain aspect of the internet, that makes the assumption, that “Hey, since I happen to be talking to you, I am your equal, and then not only that, I actually know more than you do about this thing” ... I got 30 years in this business, and I'm not an arrogant person, but you know something, I do know a little bit about it.

This statement reveals the limits to fan productivity in the professional's imagination. James seems to consider fan input extremely welcome, until certain boundaries are breached. Respect for his and other producers' final word and ownership of the series is a requirement for his continued support. Thus, old-fashioned claims of professional expertise interact with contemporary technological suspicion to create or reinforce social boundaries between media industry and “everyone else.”

Perhaps the most obvious critique of *X:WP*'s subtext is that it never became maintext. While *X:WP* remained on-air, despite myriad winks, kisses, and gropes, large fan factions clamoring for a “proper” coming out never received it (Silverman, 2001). The passion with

which many held out for a coming out can be witnessed on any *X:WP* fan site archive. As detailed above, today many fans accept the limits of subtext considering the era. Further, most respondents who previously demanded a coming out when *X:WP* was on the air now expressed happiness with the final relationship narrative. When I asked one fan at the convention why she was no longer upset about the lack of an official coming out she responded, “I don’t know, I guess I’ve grown up a little.” Other fans responded similarly. These statements may indicate a political distance in which the respondents lack the imperative for equality felt by their former selves. “Growing up” might also denote evolving and more complex understandings of sexuality and the potentials of unfixed representations. Indeed, in my interviews, bisexuality and sexual fluidity were often mentioned in relation to the show’s protagonists, as well as appreciation for a franchise that didn’t sell characters based on sexuality. Many fans of *X:WP* are current fans of series that feature openly gay characters, but are nostalgic for a time when viewers were left the freedom to decode on-screen nuances without an accompanying LGBTQ marketing campaign.

When technological innovation disrupts norms of social relations, efforts to restore the status quo soon follow. Perhaps because marketers now more actively court the gay market (Sender, 2004), a number of LGBTQ characters and narratives can presently be found on mainstream television (GLAAD, 2015). As fandom becomes increasingly mainstreamed (Contrera, 2014), media industry works to control and commodify it (Jenkins, 2006). Many producers now embrace the industry’s conceptualization of “fan service,” in which interactions with audiences work to please and acknowledge fans while “creative control is never truly ceded” (Scott, 2015, p. 179). Together, the now ubiquitous, commercialized nature of online fan feedback and the mainstreaming and segmenting of an imagined gay market restrict queer influences on content not imagined or marketed as “gay” by the industry. This loss of queered potentials for all mediated content hands over LGBTQ representation to a restrictively normative industry. The space opened up for queer fan influence by the widespread adoption of the internet has thus been substantially diminished through the efforts of an industry that has worked to re-establish its power and hierarchies following its instability in the face of technological innovation.

Queering the mainstream: Then and now

While the value of queer subtexts is still hotly debated, some audiences argue that subtext still matters. Robin described being drawn to subtext-heavy series even as out LGBTQ characters proliferate, because queer identification with certain mainstream texts

comes from being a minority, as you come to recognize the signs of the same group. As it becomes more overt in the population, some of that identification ... is starting to get lost, and I don’t know that that’s actually a good thing.

So, while this article has pointed to the limits of the queer hack, even at the nigh optimal historical-technological era and setting that *X:WP* occupied, it is also important not to wholly dismiss the hack’s potential.

That a mainstream female character was able to exist, for years, without being pinned down to a distinct gender role or sexuality, might have been more subversive than any outing ever could be. That a show like *X:WP* consistently aired queered narratives that

went unpublicized and largely unnoticed in the 1990s mainstream seems to be the most subversive outcome of technological LGBTQ fan work. Though many of these fluid moments were not the original intent of lesbian fans who demanded a coming out, they reside in the playful space of queer theory and the realization of the technological hack that explores “the limits of what is possible” (Stallman, 2014, p. 8). To appreciate the depth of the possibilities realized in the *X:WP* era is to understand how many of them might be considered impossible today.

The novelty of the primary method of the *X:WP* fan hack, online industry-fan interaction, has significantly worn off. Such exchanges are now often avoided unless part of an official campaign. *Game of Thrones* producers publicly state they ignore fan communities’ online requests for narrative tweaks (Caron, 2014) and *Glee* creator Ryan Murphy has been accused of trolling lesbian fans’ online spaces (Hogan, 2012). This article documented the rise of queer influence on mainstream mass media in the early days of Internet fandom, and now points to its decline. The arc suggests that the queer hack, while always vulnerable to enforced societal “fixes,” is also susceptible to the technological exclusion traditionally and repeatedly imposed on marginalized groups, especially following major innovations. The complexities of queering *X:WP* in the 1990s continue to represent an important early model as we look to future possibilities for the disruption of a heteronormative industry within the malleable spaces opened up by technological innovation.

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