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Interview

Exploring fandom, social media, and producer/fan interactions: An interview with *Sleepy Hollow*'s Orlando Jones

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[0.1] Keywords—Fan fiction; Tumblr; Twitter

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1. Introduction

[1.1] The arrival and use of social media has offered new avenues for connections between producers and fans, allowing for seemingly direct communications that bypass previous filters such as management and news media.

[1.2] Orlando Jones, an American film and television writer, producer, and actor who currently plays Captain Frank Irving in Fox's *Sleepy Hollow* (2013–), provides an intriguing example of how producers and fans can engage in a receptive and dynamic relationship through social media, most specifically through Twitter and Tumblr. Jones, by encouraging his fans to create and compose fan fiction, live tweet episodes alongside him, and engage in acts of shipping characters within *Sleepy Hollow* as well as other shows like *Supernatural* (2005–), displays an acute awareness of and passion for the

intricacies of fan cultures. In this sense, we are witnessing a media producer and object of fandom who uses social media platforms to interact with fans using terms and values from the previously more demarcated and often undervalued world of fandom. However, although the majority of fans and viewers have expressed delight and heightened enthusiasm at the object of fandom taking an interest in their activities, within these interactions and the blurring of worlds have been resultant controversies arising surrounding the reactions of others. Some fans view Jones's mentions of a particular pairing (such as Destiel, the Dean/Castiel pairing from *Supernatural*, and Ichabbie, the Ichabod/Abbie pairing from *Sleepy Hollow*) as endorsement, which leads to shipping wars in fandom. Others appear unhappy that Jones would publicize this aspect of fandom by engaging in discussions with those who disagree with him.

[1.3] However, what also makes Jones particularly intriguing for fan studies scholars is that Jones expresses a strong interest in the field of fan studies, declaring an appreciation for works by scholars such as Henry Jenkins (with whom he shared a panel during the 2014 Transmedia Hollywood conference) and professing an enthusiasm to study this area further. Jones participated in a live chat as part of a series on the future of fan works involving academics, industry professionals, and fans organized by the Organization of Transformative works (<http://transformativeworks.org/news/discussing-future-fanworks-march>), and he is also scheduled to be a virtual guest speaker in September 2014 at the Fan Studies Network conference.

[1.4] In light of these interesting developments, as well as Jones's receptiveness in engaging with fan studies scholars, we interviewed Jones about his use of social media. We were interested to ascertain how a media producer such as Jones, as a regular in a popular television show, perceives and maintains this form of communication with fans; how his enthusiasm for fan studies has

unfolded; and how he has negotiated and managed fan controversy. The interview was conducted via e-mail in December 2013, and the responses have been edited.

[1.5] Orlando Jones can be found on Twitter at @TheOrlandoJones (<https://twitter.com/TheOrlandoJones>) and on Tumblr (<http://theorlandojones.tumblr.com/>). *Sleepy Hollow* has been renewed for a second season on Fox, set to premiere in the autumn of 2014, and Jones is also currently involved in the creation of *Tainted Love*, a digital graphic novel series (<http://www.taintedlovemovie.com/>).

2. Fandom/fan studies

[2.1] **Q:** Are you a fan of anything?

[2.2] **A:** I'm a fan of many things, too numerous to mention. Since I've tried my hands at many creative pursuits outside of the traditional entertainment business, I am especially a fan of things I myself have tried. Film and television. Comics and graphic novels. Music. Fashion.

[2.3] I love creative expression in its many forms and celebrate living in a world where anything from Vine videos to Tumblr blogs have a clear and present distribution platform that is (at least for the time being) unencumbered by gatekeepers or stakeholders.

[2.4] **Q:** What place in your life has fandom held?

[2.5] **A:** Fandom is finding a community of like-minded enthusiasts that vibrates at your same frequency. It's great to love something, but when you find

other people who share that love in its purest expression and you can talk for hours about plot theories, or ships, or the general excitement about being moved to feel based on a creative work—that's intoxicating.

[2.6] **Q:** What is it about fandom and fan studies that fascinates you?

[2.7] **A:** My interest in fandom is born partially out of my own work as a creator and the desire to better understand how fans relate to story worlds on a granular level. It's a perfect little ecosystem, and in some ways it's a looking glass version of society at large, both positive and negative. This is the place where the disenfranchised and the marginalized have a voice, where they can express their dissatisfaction with the status quo and demand a more concerted effort by the media establishment to improve diversity, to expand beyond tropes, idioms, and stereotypes.

[2.8] It's also somewhere where they become co-creators in a self-directed narrative that might fall out of the bounds of the "intended meaning" of the original creators. Participatory culture and the creation of transformative works is an absolutely fascinating component of this conversation. So far, it's either been mocked, ignored, or intentionally disparaged, but not many people outside of academia have taken the time to understand the value it provides in terms of how stories are told in the sharing economy.

[2.9] **Q:** Have you encountered any academic work on fandom prior to this?

[2.10] **A:** I was aware that academic work was being done in this area but had no direct knowledge of the specific voices of authority in the space.

[2.11] **Q:** In your interaction with fans, what has surprised you the most about them, and about fandom in general?

[2.12] **A:** What has surprised me most [has been] the level of talent the fans possess as artists, writers, storytellers, and creative practitioners in their own right. It still amazes me that I'm involved in a creative enterprise that inspires others to create new works of such incredible scope.

[2.13] What I'm not as surprised about, but what occasionally makes me sad, is the level of distrust my presence in fandom seems to engender at times. I am sensitive to the concern that people who like things don't want an outsider to come in and pretend to like those things only to turn around and disparage them. Trust is obviously something that needs to be earned, but at a certain point, it starts to become uninteresting to constantly have to prove myself and demonstrate my authenticity. At the end of the day, though, I'm doing this more for me than anyone else, so it accomplishes nothing to worry about what other people think about me or my actions.

[2.14] **Q:** The success of *Sleepy Hollow* has partly been credited with an astute social media strategy. How much of the show's success do you think comes from an innovative take with fan engagement?

[2.15] **A:** I honestly have no idea what the exact formula is that explains the show's success. I'm reluctant to refer to what I do through my social channels as a strategy per se, but the amazing digital team at Fox and K/O have certainly done many innovative things to create awareness, drive conversation, and encourage engagement. Those efforts, coupled with the amazing performances and chemistry of Tom Mison and Nicole Beharie, as well as a uniquely diverse and multicultural cast, are all important factors in the show's success.

3. Social media

[3.1] **Q:** How much—if at all—of your interaction with fans on social media are directed by 20th Century Fox? Do they have much say and control over these interactions?

[3.2] **A:** 20th Century Fox has no say or control whatsoever in how I interact with fans on social media.

[3.3] **Q:** Social media has greatly affected the ways in which fans can interact with producers. Can you tell us how you communicate with your own fans through these channels? How strongly do you value these interactions?

[3.4] **A:** Interacting with fans through social channels is an essential tool for me as a creator, as a fan, and as a person who aspires to master some level of media literacy. This past year I learned a lot about the subtle differences in engagement between the platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr) in ways I didn't fully comprehend before. In the past I had a tendency to cut and paste my social messaging so that it could be streamlined/turnkey, but I came to appreciate the need for customized interaction that is appropriate to each audience cohort. Specifically, things that might have worked on Facebook had an entirely different (and often polarizing) response on Tumblr. And Twitter is also a fascinating tool that can be a force for a lot of good, as well as a destructive and divisive medium that does not allow for nuance and context in the same way that other mediums might.

[3.5] It's still a learning process but I'm enjoying the discovery and am continuing in my efforts to develop an authentic, relevant, and fun(ny) voice across each platform.

[3.6] **Q:** As an actor on other successful film and TV shows prior to the proliferation of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr, how have you felt the change that these platforms offer, if any, in terms of interactions with your fans and audiences?

[3.7] **A:** Historically, film and television production has lacked the immediacy of real-time engagement and feedback. You have no idea how what you're doing in the moment will be received by an audience (unless you're working on a show that is shot in front of a live studio audience). I'm a great lover of theater and have had the good fortune to star in a number of award-winning theatrical productions throughout my career. Social media offers a unique level of interaction with an audience that has some complementary paths to the experience of performing in a play. That said, there are aspect of it that can be (and often are) a double-edged sword. It's as much art as science, and it remains an arena where the rules are continuing to evolve in interesting and unexpected ways.

[3.8] **Q:** You not only regularly live tweet episodes of *Sleepy Hollow*, but you also live tweet episodes of *Supernatural* while it's airing and make references to pairings/ships from other fandoms like *Arrow's* (2012–) Olicity. Any particular reasons why you've chosen to interact with the *Supernatural* and *Arrow* fandoms? What prompted the decision to do so?

[3.9] **A:** The decision was motivated both by *Sleepy Hollow* fans who also watch those other programs suggesting/recommending that I live tweet those

shows as well as the fact that I am a fan of *Supernatural* and wanted to get caught up since I haven't had time to watch the show in the last couple of years. I considered there might be some audience overlap so that it wouldn't seem so unexpected. I'm a fan of a lot of the stuff that's on the CW right now. As I've publicly stated before, I'd be a fan of *Sleepy Hollow* and engage with the fandom (although perhaps with greater anonymity) even if I wasn't on the show. The same is true with these other programs. I enjoy watching them, so I see nothing wrong with sharing my enjoyment in a more public forum.

[3.10] **Q:** How do you leverage which fans to follow on Twitter—and have there been any unusual/persistent attempts by fans to get noticed by you, or for you to follow them?

[3.11] **A:** There are no hard-and-fast rules, but I generally follow people I know IRL (either because we've worked together, we're friends, or we've hung out), people whose opinion/perspective I am interested in (academics, journalists, satirists/comedians, content creators), or fans who have participated in the random contests I occasionally throw up wherein the prize for winning is a follow from me. I've certainly had fans who are persistent in their attempts to get me to follow, but I try to encourage them to provide a legitimate reason why I should follow them instead of just because.

[3.12] **Q:** In terms of fan and producer interactions, do you feel there is a genuine direct connection facilitated by social media, or is it illusory?

[3.13] **A:** I guess that depends on how we want to define those terms. My interactions are not motivated by agenda or expectation, so in that sense I believe them to be genuine. I'm just a country boy from Mobile, Alabama, so the idea of having fans is still strange to me. I'd like to believe I was doing

social media before it was ever a thing because I work in media and I like to be social. I sometimes read tweets from people who say something to the effect of, "I saw Orlando Jones at the Whole Foods and I was too shy to come up and say anything." What I always try to tell folks is that if you see me, come and say hello. Don't be shy.

[3.14] I enjoy people immensely, I'm intellectually curious, and I'm a lifelong learner, so if I'm engaging, it's because I have a genuine interest in doing so. In fact, this type of interaction has introduced me to some up-and-coming artists and storytellers whom I could actually see myself working with in the future.

[3.15] Anyone who knows me personally understands that I enjoy making people laugh, and that invariably translates to my efforts in the social media realm, which I try to balance alongside the things I want to share that are not meant to be humorous. I acknowledge that without context, some of what I put out might be misunderstood or perceived in a way different than I intended, and I am mindful of the impact of that both positive and negative. I take neither offense nor insult when people say "I'm trying too hard" or make other disparaging comments about what I'm doing.

[3.16] **Q:** The title of your Tumblr is "The Tumblr Experiment." Is there a particular reason why that title was chosen, and did it start out as one?

[3.17] **A:** The Wikipedia entry for the word *experiment* (and I apologize in advance for the laziness of my research protocol) refers to the notion that "an experiment is an orderly procedure carried out with the goal of verifying, refuting, or establishing the validity of a hypothesis." Although my engagement strategy on Tumblr is sort of an antistrategy, I suppose I am trying to establish the validity of a hypothesis regarding the creator as fan and the ways in which

transformative works can be elevated alongside canon while still existing as its own unique art form. I don't anticipate that the experiment will end any time soon.

4. Managing fan controversy

[4.1] **Q:** You've encountered some controversy, not just over your tweet regarding Olivia Pope from *Scandal* (2012–) but also having tweeted (in support of) about Destiel (*Supernatural*) and Olicity (*Arrow*). Has that changed your views of fans and fandom in any way?

[4.2] **A:** Prior to starting on *Sleepy Hollow* I spent 18 months on the road doing stand-up comedy. The creator/audience dynamic in a comedy club offers a unique paradigm because the end product is unformed, improvisational, and experimental. You're constantly figuring out what jokes work best and how to present them. I would perform at some clubs where my set felt like it was on fire, and other times it would be as cold as ice. I absolutely love that environment as an artist and a storyteller. My comedy was not designed to be politically correct or civilized. My success or failure depended on whether or not it was funny, and sometimes humor comes from exploring a side of ourselves that we might filter in polite company. I brought some of that perspective to social media, and as I mentioned earlier, I learned the importance of addressing your audience within the context of the medium you've chosen to engage them.

[4.3] I'm genuinely fascinated by the self-policing mechanisms that exist in social media, which run the gamut from demanding accountability for statements that are offensive to taking on a mob mentality (complete with pitchforks and torches) that's out for blood. I have learned the importance (and

value) of being more precise in my language, but I fully expect to make additional missteps in the future, which I will attempt to navigate with sincerity and candor. I am also sure that a certain segment of Tumblr in particular will find further reasons to dislike me or pass judgment, and that's a part of the process too.

[4.4] I got into some trouble recently when I expressed the sentiment that "I don't give offense, you take offense," but it's a point of view that I believe has merit. It sometimes feels that a segment of the audience in fandom or across social media (or really, anywhere) is looking for things to be offended over. So while I (hopefully) have neither the ego nor arrogance to dictate whether someone has a right to be offended over something I say, I still maintain that they make the choice to be offended by it. In saying this, I understand that it doesn't even matter what I actually meant, as they might be offended by my words regardless of the meaning I intended. That doesn't mean I'm blaming them for saying something offensive, and it doesn't mean I wasn't wrong (or that they were right). Although intention may not mitigate offense, neither is offense a zero-sum game.

[4.5] So long as folks see my sincere effort and know that I'm approaching these sorts of things authentically, with humility and without the presumption that I'm entitled to anything, I think it'll all work out. And if not, that's OK too.

[4.6] **Q:** You've been asked on Twitter to refrain from talking publicly about the "ugly side of fandom." Do you think there are limits, as a public figure, to the types of issues you want to engage with, or in terms of how you run your Twitter account/types of things you want to tweet about?

[4.7] **A:** I respectfully reject the premise that there are (or should be) any limitations to what I can tweet about. If people don't like it or disagree they have the ability to opt out. If they choose to follow, then the implied contract is that they take the good with the bad. And if there is some exception to the position I just espoused, I suppose we'll cross that tweet when we come to it.

[4.8] **Q:** Do you think fan expectations of who you are and who you can be (especially in lending a voice to their ship) are overwhelming?

[4.9] **A:** I don't know that I'd call them overwhelming, but I definitely know that I won't live up to certain expectations that have been assigned to me. I'm not a writer on *Sleepy Hollow* or *Supernatural*. Nothing I say in any forum will have a bearing on how the writers/creators of those shows (or any show whose audience I may choose to interact with) will do their job and tell their stories—nor should it. I'm genuinely pleased that my overall appreciation for shipping and implied endorsement of certain ships is viewed positively by many, and I make no apologies to those who don't like that facet of my interaction. As I said before, I think it's a revelation that transformative works have evolved to the extent they have and that fans have an outlet to bring their inner voices and deepest fantasies to life in the stories they create and share. Any creator who mocks or maligns it does so at their peril.

[4.10] **Q:** Some fans are sensitive about actors and producers breaking the fourth wall in fandom, and you've consistently broken through. Thinking about your experiences in the past year, has there been any memorable fan encounters—positive or negative—that were specific to your constant breaking of the fourth wall?

[4.11] **A:** Again, the experiences that resonate most deeply are the creative works that have come from fandom that I've directly or indirectly encouraged and supported (such as slash involving my character, or Ichabbie). I respect those who are sensitive to the manner in which I have broken the fourth wall. It is not my intention to offend them or make them feel uncomfortable. That said, I have zero intention of backing off or changing course. I'm having fun. The majority of feedback I've received from fans suggests that they enjoy the manner in which I engage. The people who feel differently have every right to feel that way, just as much as I have every right not to let their point of view derail me.

[4.12] **Q:** You've written about accountability, and about using that as a standard to guide you in your interactions with fandom. Do you think that approach has helped and has made your fan engagement different from others, and more meaningful?

[4.13] **A:** Actually, yes. This is a fluid process. I try to make sure my feet and my tongue go in the same direction. I'm not interested in adulation or sycophants. I've heard people say that they've never encountered a celebrity who interacts in the way I have chosen to do so. They seem to appreciate that, for the most part, I endeavor to be consistent, sincere, and fair. And I gladly take the positive along with the negative because I sort of set myself up for that.

[4.14] I quickly realized the contradiction in my wanting to be treated like anyone else in fandom because I obviously bring some unique baggage that does make my contribution different than others. But I was a fan first. You may call me the Twitter and Tumblr personality Orlando Jones who occasionally appears in film, on television, and onstage.

5. Fan fiction

[5.1] **Q:** You have particularly encouraged the composition of fan fiction by *Sleepy Hollow* fans. This move is quite unusual for those involved in the production of the canonical text. To what extent do you feel that this form of literature is important?

[5.2] **A:** There was a recent definitive ruling in the courts that Sherlock Holmes is now in the public domain and no longer under the exclusive control of the estate of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. I suppose that means that besides the BBC show, and *Elementary* (2012–) and the Robert Downey Jr. film series (2009, 2011), others can now exploit that intellectual property to tell new stories. But fan fiction has been a part of the Holmes story world from the beginning, and in some respects has been seamlessly integrated into canon to such an extent that new audiences may not even be aware of the difference.

[5.3] Transformative works (and fan fiction specifically) matter because they establish that an original work has become part of the fabric of a broader narrative story world that says something important about the world and how we see ourselves in it. Tens of thousands of books are published every year. Hundreds of television pilots are produced. But what makes certain ones stand out and rise above the white noise? Clearly there are business models and economic considerations that factor in, but sometimes a certain story becomes a part of the zeitgeist in ways the original creators could never have imagined. When fanboy Phillip Iscove decided to mash up the two best-known Washington Irving short stories in order to bring Ichabod Crane into the 21st century and took it to superfans like Alex Kurtzman and Bob Orci, there's no way they could have known what the show *Sleepy Hollow* would become. The

contribution of the fans as co-creators of this real-time story world is undoubtedly a part of the shows' success.

[5.4] **Q:** How do you feel about fan fiction (including real person fiction) written about your character, Frank Irving?

[5.5] **A:** I feel great about it. I'm excited to see it regardless of any particular kink, ship, or scenario that may emerge. As I said from the very first tweet that set things in motion: "Bring. It. On." And like I also said, I am clearly in *way* over my head.

[5.6] **Q:** You've indicated a desire to perform fan fiction readings previously. Given the recent controversy surrounding Caitlin Moran and the *Sherlock* (2010–) fandom and your own comments regarding it, how do you think you would approach this now? Do you think there should be more protocols in play to protect fans' interest and their creative works being made use of in public without their permission?

[5.7] **A:** I would never read fan fiction in any public forum without the explicit permission of the fan who wrote it.

[5.8] **Q:** *Sleepy Hollow* has resulted in two distinct main pairs of ships, Ichabbie and Ichatrina. How have you approached the dynamics and sometimes competitive elements that shipping can foster within a fan culture?

[5.9] **A:** I haven't consciously approached it in any particular way. The relationship that Ichabod Crane and Abbie Mills have works as well as it does because of the amazing performances of my friends and colleagues, Tom Mison and Nicole Beharie. I think certain fans have unfairly maligned the really

outstanding work of Katia Winter, but some of that is to be expected because of the way in which Katrina Crane's characterization has necessarily unfolded. As I've said before, "Ship who you want to ship because it's a big harbor." The implied subtext from those who may or may subscribe to a certain ship and what others perceive it to mean in terms of its cultural and social implication (and the ism schism) is way above my pay grade.

[5.10] **Q:** The production of fan fiction and other fan transformative works falls into the gray area of copyright and intellectual property laws. Do you think fans should have more rights and power to transform and shape the text?

[5.11] **A:** Again, the premise of your question depends on how we define the terms you've set forth. What types of rights are we referring to? What are the potential circumstances and outcomes of this type of permission? Although we exist in a mash-up/remix culture that should allow for certain fair use provisions to exploit existing works, I do believe that copyright laws serve a vital purpose. I also subscribe to the idea that enforcing intellectual property rights is a necessary remedy in those instances where a third party seeks to exploit someone's creative work for financial benefit without compensating the original author. There's also the concern that has come up a few times as to whether the new work might create unnecessary confusion in the marketplace. But fan works are not going anywhere, and I'm much more interested in figuring out how their efforts can coexist alongside original works instead of going back underground. To the best of my knowledge, no case law exists to establish any sort of precedent, so I'm sure this isn't the last we'll be hearing on the subject. Until then, write on!

6. Acknowledgments

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