



When Actors Become Characters: The Ethics of Digital Real-Person Fan Fiction



[Elijah O'Donnell/Unsplash/Modified](#)

In the world of fanfiction, there is a thin line between creative works by fans who admire and take inspiration from their favorite celebrities and stories that might be harmful to that person's identity and reputation. A popular subgenre within the fanfiction world is called "real-person fanfiction" or RPF. This subgenre of fanfiction occurs when fans write their favorite public figures—including actors, athletes, and musicians—into fictional stories. These realities are created, owned, and controlled by fans, leading to a wide array of creative and sometimes disturbing storylines. For instance, one story depicts an adulterous affairs

between Joe Biden and Barack Obama, whereas another story is titled "Jesus and Hitler: A Romance." The latter story is controversial precisely because of narrative events such as the following: "I've never been with a man, either, Jesus. I'm scared, just like you are, but we can't let our fears rule us! I love you, Jesus. Do you love me?' Hitler's eyes had tears in them. Jesus smiles. 'Yes, Hitler. I love you.' They embraced. Again, they kissed passionately" (Angkras, 2010). Beyond the offense given to religious communities in this story, other real-person fanfiction narratives range from wholesome but mundane stories to hardcore explicit erotica. There are also hundreds of thousands of fanfictions tagged as "incest," "rape/non-con[sensual]," "domestic violence," and "underage sex," a range of often-forbidden topics enabled by the freedom of expression and creativity afforded in the often-anonymous world of fanfiction writing.

Controversy over the ethics of fanfiction gets even more intense when its subjects are contemporary real individuals such as celebrities. Fans have used the abilities to create and quickly share content in digital form to write their favorite public figures into scenarios the fan may have fantasized about, but which may be taboo in real life and shocking to the actor or celebrity depicted. In most communities, sexual relationships between siblings is generally stigmatized; in the digital arena of fanfiction, amateur authors can safely "publish" narratives such as "Taken," written by "Missbeizy," which depicts a fictional sexual relationship between the actor Elijah Wood and his sister in its made-up story line. Siblings such as James and Oliver Phelps, the actors who played the Weasley twins in the *Harry Potter* series, as well as the actors Liam and Chris Hemsworth, have also been the protagonists in such lurid fan-written creations. While many RPF creations function as satire or as simply bad story-telling, other fan creations feature well-known actors or celebrities being brutally raped or in scenarios involving underage sexual encounters. All of these raise the question of how much control a real but public person has over his or her image in fictional creations.



Fans of fanfiction have debated such controversial extremes. Celebrities have taken to social media to air their personal opinions about fanfictions and real-person fanfiction narratives. For instance, Lynn Flewelling, author of *The Nightrunner Series*, has not been shy about her feelings: “That being said, here’s my opinion on people writing sexually oriented fanfiction about real people. It’s WRONG, CREEPY, VERY EXTREMELY ICKY, and should be ILLEGAL. Anyone still unclear on my feelings should read the previous sentence again.” Celebrities such as Daniel Radcliffe, James McAvoy, and Michael Fassbender have encountered their own fanfiction echoes and seem to be amused by them. On *The Graham Norton Show*, Hugh Jackman, James McAvoy, and Michael Fassbender were read the synopses of multiple fanfictions about themselves; Fassbender called them “amazing” and McAvoy joked after reading one about him having Fassbender’s baby, “IVF can do incredible things these days” (BBC, 2014).

Fans also have been divided in their opinions of real-person fanfiction. Some argue that it is their right to creative expression and that this a way for them to put their admiration and love for these celebrities into words. They claim that it does no harm as long as it is respectful, described appropriately as “fiction,” and published on the right websites. A now-defunct Reddit user defended real-person fanfiction by stating that “celebrities do have a right to privacy, but most RPF writers aren’t engaging in behavior that the celebrity should find troubling. We don’t stalk them, we don’t approach them in real life and we don’t actually believe that our made-up stories are real” ([deleted], 2018). Other fans who oppose these creations also publicly worry about the potential harms that such stories might spawn: “I’m sure there are quality stories out there, but I think the fact fanfiction deals with real people and, from what I’ve seen around, can also feed delusions about these real people which creeps me out to some extent” (Andy, 2015).

Given that “real” art is often transgressive and offensive, and that it often uses or targets real people, the question becomes: How should we think about the ethics of fan-created expressive works that center on and feature real people who may not agree with such a usage? What are the limits to our thoughts and expressions involving celebrities and public figures? When does fanfiction become a real ethical problem?

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the ethical concerns and problems with real-person fanfiction (RPF)?
2. What ethical values are in conflict when fans create RPF works and celebrities attempt to control their public image?
3. What are the ethical lines that RPF should not cross? Would these limits apply to professional artists who often base fictional stories on real-life events and figures?
4. Some art is specifically designed to lampoon, criticize, or embarrass its real-life subjects. Might RPF serve this critical function? If so, how does this impact your judgments of the ethics of RPF works?



Further Information:

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