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Words and Worlds: A Conversation on Writing, Craft, and the Power of Deep Fandom with Kij Johnson

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"All literature, highbrow or low, from the Aeneid onward, is fan fiction....Through parody and pastiche, allusion and homage, retelling and reimagining the stories that were told before us and that we have come of age loving–amateurs–we proceed, seeking out the blank places in the map that our favorite writers, in their greatness and negligence, have left for us, hoping to pass on to our own readers–should we be lucky enough to find any–some of the pleasure that we ourselves have taken in the stuff that we love: to get in on the game.

All novels are sequels; influence is bliss."
- Michael Chabon

"Creative engagement with existing works is one of the most fertile and really underutilized tools I can think of.
- Kij Johnson

Introduction

This article series explores our current knowledge around a triad of related issues: creativity, technology and learning. We do this through interviews with notable creativity researchers across a range of disciplines: design, business, psychology,

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writing and the arts (Cain et al. 2017; Henriksen et al. 2017a, b; Henriksen and Mishra 2020; Warr et al. 2018). The diversity of our interview subjects offers both unique and nuanced perspectives, as well as a range of common themes—providing a complex, detailed and emergent picture of current creativity research.

Our guest for this article was Kij Johnson, an award-winning author, editor, and Associate Professor in the *University of Kansas's* MFA in *Creative Writing program*. Though primarily a fiction specialist, Kij offers courses in a range of topics related to writing. In her teaching Kij brings some serious credibility as an artist, scholar, and all-around "uber-geek." She has worked as managing editor at *Tor Books*; collections and special editions editor for *Dark Horse Comics*; editor, continuity manager and creative director for *Wizards of the Coast*; program manager on the *Microsoft Reader*; and documentation manager at *Real Networks*. She has also run chain and independent bookstores, worked as a radio announcer and engineer, and edited cryptic crosswords.

Kij made her first sale as an author in 1987 and has worked steadily since, publishing three novels, several novellas, and dozens of short pieces to markets including *Amazing Stories*, *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Clarkesworld, Duelist Magazine, Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Realms of Fantasy*, SciFiction.com, and Tor.com. She won the *Theodore A. Sturgeon Memorial Award* in 1994 for her novelette in *Asimov's*, "Fox Magic" and has won numerous awards and nomination for her writing since then, including prestigious *Nebula* and *Hugo* award nominations for Best Novella for *The Dream-Quest of Vellitt Boe* (2016), which revisited the world of H. P Lovecraft's *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* from a feminine perspective.

Our interview with Kij was an illuminating journey through her experiences, observations, and insights as a publishing author and practicing academic and literary scholar. Talking with her was at turns part master class in creative writing and part demonstration of the artist at work, with

liberal dashes of literary theory and pop culture thrown in for good measure. In some ways, Kij's interview was the most intertextual of the interviews we have conducted in this series, as she made a rich array of connections between multiple texts and ideas. She moved easily between the lessons she teaches her students about the principles and practices of writing and modeling those lessons through explorations of her own ideas and creations. Below are insights from what was delightful, engaging, and often rollicking interview with a true creative and scholar.

Pragmatic Mindsets for Exploring Creative Ideas

Kij, as both writer and teacher, believes in a pragmatic mindset to creativity, in embracing what's real and necessary about craft without romanticizing its origins or practice.

> There's a myth about the arts that says, "That's the way it is - you can't teach talent. They say you can't teach genius. You can't teach great writing. You can teach good writing. But you can't teach great writing." And I do feel that there are things that are difficult to teach. But most of those things are difficult to teach because you have to spend a whole lifetime reading to have read 5000 books that become the database of material from which you are drawing as you create your book. If you've only read one hundred books, your database is very thin. You don't have as many options, you don't see where the margins of previously produced work are, and so you don't know how to push to those margins.`

This notion of being primed for creativity by developing a wide breadth of experience and knowledge across genres, resonates well with a transdisciplinary perspective on creativity (Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein 2013). If creativity lives in the enactment of inspiration, inspiration lives in the development of a wide range of experiences and knowledge to draw upon—a "database" as she puts it.

That said, the best way to learn to write creatively is to just write. Kij tells her students to listen to the advice author Brenda Ueland offers in her book "If You Want to Write" (Ueland 2010). As she says, "It's this comforting little book that says, 'You have all the tools you need to write. You don't need any more vocabulary. You don't need fancier syntax than you've got. You have everything you need right now. All you need is to let yourself do the work.'" At this point, she demonstrated how her creative writing works through the acts of observation and interrogation.

> Go for a walk, look at a bird, ask yourself five questions about that bird. Now, you can write a story about that bird because you already have everything else you need. And that's that sense that all you need is just to get out of

the way of the craft that you've already developed, of the tactics that you've already learned, and may learn some new tactics. That, to my mind, is how most writing operates.

Kij is unafraid to demystify her practice as a creative author. She started her academic career as a historian and frequently brings a historian's touch to her craft. "This is a really problematic thing for me to say," she confided, "but a lot of what I do is technical." She described how a technical/ psychological analysis of creative writing can be troubling for some, but technical knowledge is inherent in the craft of creative work.

Kij's pragmatic conception of creativity aligns with existing research. For instance, while creativity is emergent in inspiration, it cannot happen without the "craft" or "work" of the process, which requires both broad and deep technical domain knowledge combined with effort and commitment to getting the work done. In this series we have often described creativity as being "(in)disciplined" (Mishra et al. 2012). This term has a twofold meaning: 1) creativity operates across disciplines (it is "in-disciplined" in behavior), thus inspiration can come from varied experiences, ideas or genres, but at the same time, 2) creativity also functions within a discipline, which has technical knowledge, norms, tools and constructs that a person should know to create successfully. This connects with Kij's notion of creativity as requiring a wide-ranging "database" of inspiration and understanding to draw on, as well as a technical sense of the craft.

Working Along the Continuum of Creativity

For her, creative writing is a mutual, even contractual, bond between author and reader. "We have to always remember that creative work, the act of creation, is a personal, private act," she said. "But the reception of creativity, the reception of the story or the painting or the photograph is a completely different act." She goes on to explain how both creation and its reception reside along what Brian Attebery [1992, quoting others] called the "continuum of creativity":

> On one side of the continuum we have imaginative works—truly unfiltered imagination, which is impervious to the outside eye. So, I can write a dream out, I can draw a picture of a dream or something like that. But the only person who really knows what I'm attempting to explain over here is me. On the other side of the continuum, we have people attempting to exactly reproduce reality. But as I've said before, to exactly reproduce reality takes precisely as long as the reality itself did…So, we have these two extremes. We have something that is completely incapable of being understood

because it is pure protean creativity. And over here we have something impenetrable because it is absolute mimicry. And everything operates somewhere in this continuum."

Though not a professional photographer (she says she's fascinated by taking pictures of "dirt"), Kij looks to photography as a medium that approaches the creativity continuum from a reflexive, self-aware perspective, where the creator is continually aware of their own "presence" in the creative process. For instance, speaking of photography in the context of this self-reflexive stance, Kij referred to a book *Art and Fear*, (Bayles and Orland 2001) where the two authors speak about the art of photography and the challenge of capturing their personal vision, in an art form that is fundamentally mimetic. She said, "I think as photographers, you're never really just taking the picture. You are taking a picture of yourself taking the picture, with your presence in the picture as thoroughly as the voice of a writer is present in a story." In this way, she describes the creative individual's awareness of their own role, thus staying within the accessible regions of the continuum, of making the personal a reality and making reality a personal artifact.

In order to place a creative artefact (a photo, a piece of fiction) somewhere along this accessible spectrum of creative work, a person must make choices or decisions that will shape the work. These decisions are not mere acts of inspiration, but as Kij points out, they emerge from conscious and often technical analysis. They come from a knowledge of the discipline and craft that one is working with. While discussing aspects of writing and writerly craft, she brought our attention to a notion put forth by writer Samuel R. Delany in his essay "About 5,750 Words" (Delany 1977). Speaking about a class she had taught the night before, she modeled how Delaney analyzes the notion of style in writing:

[Style and content] exist when you put a string of words together, and every word you choose changes both the style and the content. Delany gives an example, saying, "I put three things on the desk. I put three books on the desk. I put three books of poetry on the desk. I put… (and then he lists three book titles of poetry) on the desk." As far as structure, they're the same sentence. But in every case, you're seeing a different person and you're seeing a different desk because of exactly what is being said…So, when I talk about creativity, this is very much part of the argument I make. That the choice of which word to put after the word you just wrote down—those decisions are craft decisions, but they materialize as art.

Thus, creativity requires this level of deep discipline as well as awareness of self, where every move in the creative space generates meaning, and changes and influences both what came before and what will come next. The creative individual is, therefore, in a continual state of improvisational dialogue between the evolving artifact and the meanings it generates, something consistent with some of our previous interviewees have spoken about (Henriksen et al. 2017a, b).

On Genre and Cultivating Creative Consumers

Our discussion of the creative continuum led us to also explore the nature of genre and how creativity and creative works are crafted to be received. As an author working in fantasy and science fiction, Kij understands how readers can react both positively and negatively when writers work with and against the grain in particular genres.

My job is, if I want you to take you someplace you didn't expect in a story, to convince you that you want to go there. We start out as a crime novel and we end as a love story. My job was to convince you that that was a valid trade. That in moving from the one kind of story to the other, that you wanted to go there with me. All I'm doing is tempting you to see things my way. We make an initial deal and after that, I'm just convincing you that you'd rather do it my way than whatever your platonic ideal of a crime novel looks like.

Here Kij alludes to the notion of persuasion in creative works, of convincing artistic consumers that risk-taking and open-mindedness are virtues to be found at both ends of the creative contract. In some sense, this genre bending skill perhaps points to the notion of "making the familiar strange," which is sometimes noted as a key to creativity (Stouffer et al. 2004)—and in this case, is also a rhetorical move for the writer who wants to bring readers along on an unexpected path.

This idea also connects to the idea of (in)disciplined creativity mentioned earlier, particularly if we consider genre as being a form of discipline, which sets up certain road-maps or structure for how a story or narrative should unfold. Subverting these often closely held expectations, these genre-based rules, can be creative in and of itself but also has it risks.

Any time one is working within a genre, and specifically within a very narrow genre, like, let's say the superhero comic, it's "We have to have a splash page. We have to have it so that by page twenty-four we're done and out." We have all of these expectations for every single issue of a comic book that is a superhero comic book. So, readers, in that case, don't want to be surprised by me.

That said, the subversion of genre conventions can also lead to new forms of representation. Thus, one can cultivate and teach creative appreciation and connoisseurship through a process of incremental tinkering with genre expectations and forms. But she cautions that artists and creatives should not take acceptance for granted:

> Readers do not owe the writer anything that the writer does not earn. It's the writer's job to earn it. If I want something really inaccessible to be read by every single person alive, that would be my problem to manage, because it's not [the reader's] job. If I do my job right by writing something accessible that also stretches their horizons a little, that's good. And then the next person or the next story stretches them a little more and stretches them a little more. But I'm not going to get that if I go in large right away.

This is a useful idea for writers in all genres who want to create something out of their ideas that will have impact on wider audiences. Kij's notion that finding the sweet spot of doing something that is different but stretches readers horizons a bit "and then the next person or the next story stretches them a little more and stretches them a little more", also resonates with the idea of incremental steps to creativity. We have pointed to Hofstader's (1982) concept of creativity as not always being about grand discipline-changing acts, but as "variations on a theme". Which speaks to incremental creativity—making changes in small but powerful ways that build over time.

The willingness to subvert genre conventions, Kij believes, can sometimes go too far, particularly when authors come to believe in their own privilege. It is then that becoming responsive to the readers, and maybe the most avid readers (the fans) becomes important.

On Artistic Privilege and Creative Fandom

Kij suggests a need and responsibility of artists to temper their feelings of creative freedom with appreciation for those who support their endeavors. "I feel a lot of times as though a big issue with creativity is an arrogance that I see in certain artists, certain writers, that the reader should want what I'm giving them." She notes a certain privilege exists in some artistic circles that ironically serves to stifle certain genres of creative expression, while simultaneously elevating artists' own pretensions.

> There's a centralized privilege that says, "You should want to read fourteen hundred pages of my ranting on said topic. You should want to read that. And if you don't, it's because you're stupid or lazy or just not equipped for what I'm doing." But it's so disrespectful to the recipient, the receiver of art to assume that that

their job is to just humbly kneel down and accept what we give them. That drives me crazy because there is so much privilege built into that, you know?…Sometimes you want to read a romance.

She herself has the deepest appreciation for the kinds of creative "interrogation" that comes from expansive, appreciative fandom and love of genre. Kij noted half a dozen examples of deep fandom but saved special consideration for the kind of creative appreciation, immersion, and curiosity shown by fans of the original *Star Trek* TV series:

> Star Trek fandom was all based in smart people who kept asking questions about art. Any critic's criticism, you know, any academic department that engages with art, is doing the exact same thing. They're interrogating it. They're looking at it. Fans are often interrogating a work creatively, which we don't talk about enough as a strategy for engaging with art. But the fans were operating in really, really creative ways.

She also brought up an example of amateur scholarship done in relation to the *Twilight* series, describing how deep appreciation - fandom - can become the catalyst for a more complex interrogation of meaning and representation.

> The smartest critical thinking out there is often fans. Just the numbers would indicate that some of them are going to have something smart to say. There's an amateur scholar who was raised Mormon. And of course, Stephanie Morris [the *Twilight* series author] was Mormon. So this scholar analyzed the *Twilight* books through the filter - the teachings - and lens of the Mormon Church. She considered what you were trained to expect or what the church is telling you. This fan argues that those elements in *Twilight*, when you see it as a Mormon book, as a book written by a Mormon. And she's not writing a religious book at all.

Thus, in this context, the creative work becomes the foundation of a whole possible series of alternative "readings" and creations that are also creative. This is of particular importance in the space that Kij works within—science fiction, where fans often take stories in interesting and unexpected directions through their interrogation of the original work of art and their personal and unique points of view.

Creative Fandom and Education

Exploring how creative fandom supports engaged critical thinking and innovative extrapolation led to a discussion of how prior experiences can influence the use of emerging technology, particularly for learning. Kij mentioned the innovative, transdisciplinary instructional practices of her colleague

and Director of *University of Kansas' Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction,* Chris McKitterick:

> He co-teaches a class [on science fiction] with a biologist or a philosopher, a sociologist, a physicist or a paleontologist. He does something he calls 'Level Up', which is a very deep, deep reinvention of how to use Blackboard and Web sites to teach.

Kij describes how McKitterick's "Level Up" approach allows students to decide how they want to engage with the course content in ways that go beyond simple reading and recitation. She mentions examples of creative dance as a means to analyze plot, the development of graphic novels and manga, explorations of imaginary cultures through fashion design. She contends that by giving multiple creative options to "level up" from basic reading-reviewing-reporting assignments, McKitterick, his co-teachers, and his students engage in the ideas of a course on higher, more elaborate, and more sophisticated levels of comprehension and expression.

This notion of leveling up – of taking engagement with ideas beyond standard tropes of schooling – brings us back to the idea of taking creative, even imaginary, worlds and ideas seriously. Kij is fond of using the word "interrogation" when it comes to serious, even scholarly, engagement with creative works:

> Interrogation—that's the word I use for this. Because that's what scholars do. They interrogate a work, and you can interrogate a work in various ways through all these different filters. Here's my postmodern filter. Here's my modernist filter. Here's my eco-crit filter. You can interrogate a work by attempting to reproduce it or attempting to unpack it into a larger world…It's interesting to think about this stuff, and critical engagement can be deeply creative. But creative engagement with existing works is one of the most fertile and really underutilized tools I can think of.

In discussions as varied as students designing their own courses, Klingon topography, and the decline of creative measures in students in the 2010s (which for reasons of space we cannot get into in this article), the conversation came back around to the key issue, and one that we explore in each of our interviews, that of Kij's definition of creativity. The idea of craft and the disciplining of it is key to her way of thinking about creativity.

> We act as though it's protean. We act as though it's a big, waffly thing that can't be identified. But creativity, as seen in the wild, is actually creativity that's already been filtered through craft. I made it. I made a choice. The minute I decided to express myself creatively, even if it is only to say I'm going to express this in dance versus in a poem. So, creativity exists in a person and there are

ways to make people feel more creative. But creativity is always manifested through craft, through craft and technical skills.

We cannot imagine a better encapsulation of creativity for teaching and learning, particularly in Kij's focus on the fact that creativity already exists within people, and needs only to be brought forward through knowledge and craft. In previous articles, we have pointed to how creativity *can* be defined, despite popular misconceptions that it is too vague, inimitable, or abstract (Mishra et al. 2013), and that it can be taught and learned, if only through the evocation of what is already there, and equipping people with the knowledge, craft, and habits of mind that evoke it.

Conclusion

What come through most in this interview is that Kij is first and foremost an author of wildly creative and entertaining fiction who is incredibly down-to-earth in her approach and appreciation of creativity and creative endeavors. Luckily for the rest of us, she is eager to share her insights, observations, and tricks of the trade in order to demystify creativity as something unobtainable by ordinary mortal means.

Her advice to her MFA students, to ask basic questions of their creative ideas strikes us as elegantly simple yet powerfully pragmatic and effective. It says that to know a story (or creative idea), we must interrogate it as though it were utterly real in its dimensions, rules, physics, biology, cultures, and histories. She points to the activities of creative communities that have grown and evolved around myriad creative works, how they've expanded to make even the most fanciful and imaginary worlds as real to us as the one we currently inhabit. She also remains positively convinced that creativity can be taught, particularly when students are made aware of the tools, techniques, and communities of support and engagement that already exist for their immediate use.

This creative worldview would seem to apply particularly well to how teachers can approach technology and learning in their own practice. In our interview, we talked about how science fiction depictions of technologies and technology-rich contexts can inform our own ideas of how to leverage the technologies we already have. We also talked about how interrogating our own flights of educational technology fancy can help orient us to thinking realistically about future possibilities for teaching and learning that may be approaching faster than we realize. We can build entire worlds of meaning and significance with the most basic of questions – interrogating our ideas about teaching with ever emerging technologies until we craft realities that match our creativity.

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