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Folk Music in a Digital Age: The Importance of Face-to-Face Community Values in Filk Music

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract

Filk is broadly defined as the traditional folk-based music and related community created by and for a sub-community of science fiction and fantasy fans. Born in the 1950s, filk today includes international participants of various experience levels and musical styles. Social context and music are equally important in this tradition; prominent values include self-expression, play and building a face-to-face co-creative, collaborative group experience. This article, founded on Textual Poachers *(1992), assumes that filk remains a folk music in many ways, and that filkers still prefer face-to-face musical and personal interaction in spite of a lively, diverse online filk community. I gathered ethnographic data through participant-observation and a questionnaire to examine the following questions. How does the filk community value face-to-face and online interaction, how do filkers negotiate moving between these two domains and how do the domains interact? With four generations of filkers now active, are there generational differences? I postulate that the face-to-face group creativity and co-creation in filk is based on a fluid and permeable performer/audience boundary, allowing individual and group expression to happen simultaneously. This in-person, real-time, deeply immersive co-created experience reinforces a strong sense of community, making face-to-face interaction highly valued.*

Keywords

filk music

folk music

face-to-face

performer/audience

fan studies

ethnography

(end of p. 159)

Filk is the traditional music and community created by and for a sub-community of science

fiction and fantasy fans (Childs-Helton and Childs-Helton 1996: 263). Its foundations are in the

late-night group filk circles found at fan-run conventions. Today there are many forms of fan

musics, but filk retains many of its original values that date back to the 1950s. At root and

heart, it is a form of folk music, since community members highly value performing and hearing

music face to face. Dan Ben-Amos defines folklore contextually:

> For the folkloric act to happen, two social conditions are necessary: both the performers
>
> and the audience have to be in the same situation and be part of the same reference
>
> group. This implies that folklore communication takes place in a situation in which
>
> people confront each other face to face and relate to each other directly. (1971: 12–13)

His succinct definition describes filk perfectly: 'In sum, folklore is artistic interaction in small

groups' (1971: 13). Henry Jenkins sees much fan activity as folk activity, noting in *Textual*

Poachers that fans 'appropriate raw materials from the commercial culture but use them as the basis for the creation of a contemporary folk culture' (1992: 279). By these definitions, and in light of how filk is currently practiced in its community, filk retains folk practices and values in a digital age, an age in which fan relationships and practices are mediated across great distances through technology. The community's preference for face-to-face interaction is evidenced by filk activities at fan-run science fiction and filk-specific conventions, concerts, house events (small concerts and filk circles held in private homes) and jams, in spite of filkers having had a lively, diverse community online from the days of ARPANET forward.

Purpose of study and methodology

Several scholars, including Lucy Bennett, have called for more attention to 'offline' fan activities, looking especially at where the '"offline" practices fit and relate to the online realm' (2014: 15). Bennett also wants more study of music fandoms, where 'the ultimate emphasis on being there, physically present, at a concert' is still highly valued (2014: 15). Karen Busse and Kristina Hellekson have asked for more research into how fans navigate moving in and out of online and offline spaces (2006: 16). In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins considers fans to be 'active collaborators in the research process' (1992: 7). Paul Booth argues that each 'wave' of fan studies has moved further from the fan; he contends that the 'discipline should also turn back to examine its roots: the fans themselves' (2013: 7). He continues, describing desired approaches for fourth wave studies:

...there is still an enormous off-line component of fandom that should also be described and theorized if fan researchers are to understand fully twenty-first-century fandom. Fans do use the Internet to meet up, form communities and create original texts, but they also meet in real life to discuss, cosplay, game and engage in group viewings, among other activities. Fan researchers need to take this off-line practice into account. The best way to do this, as first wave fan studies would indicate, is (end of p. 160) through ethnographic methodologies that emphasize the fan's voice as well as the researcher's. (2013: 8)

This study responds to these calls in terms of subject matter (face-to-face interaction; negotiating movement between in-person and online domains) and methodology (ethnography and using fan research). Booth's request for a return to the research practices Jenkins used in *Textual Poachers* (1992) is appropriate, since Chapter 8, 'Strangers no more, we sing' (1992: 250–76), provides the impetus for my research. This study examines the ongoing value of face-to-face interaction in the filk community from its roots in early science fiction fandom and the American Folk Music Revival. Both drew upon media sources (e.g., magazines and sound recordings), yet both deeply valued face-to-face interaction (e.g., science fiction conventions and Folk Music Revival 'hootenannies') while using the media of the day to stay in touch between conventions and events. From the beginning, filkers have expected to interact in person and at a distance using analogue and, as it became available, digital mediation; interactions at a distance have always reinforced and extended personal interaction.

This article briefly outlines the increased use of online media in the filk community, examines in depth the community's values regarding face-to-face versus online interactions and addresses the interplay between these two modes. Further, it examines the importance of the role of in-person communal creativity, as manifested through a fluid audience/performer boundary, creating strong social bonds in the filk community. Chapter 8 of Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (1992: 250–76) was the first in-depth examination of filk. There have been no major academic studies about filk since Solomon Davidoff's 1996 thesis, '"Filk": A study of shared musical traditions and related phenomena among fan groups', though academic fan Melissa Tatum has published several articles and fan Gary McGath has published an exhaustive history of filk as an e-book (2015). Since I was an informant for both Jenkins and Davidoff, I am motivated to document the current values of in-person and online interactions in the filk community almost 25 years after Jenkins' landmark study, providing a temporal snapshot that updates these works.

Many media fandoms exist both online and in person; this study examines how the filk community specifically functions in both domains. How does the community value each form of interaction, and how do filkers negotiate moving between these domains? How do the domains interact? Since technology allows filkers to do almost everything online that they do at a convention (chat, share music and lyrics, view a concert), why do people spend their limited resources to attend conventions? Further, according to culturally defined generational categories (Pew Research Center 2015), current filkers comprise four groups: the Silent Generation (born 1928–1945), Baby Boomers (1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1980), and

Millennials (1981–1997). Research suggests that Millennials prefer to interact in virtual space, so is generational preference a factor in filk's steadily ageing demographic? Are values shifting as Baby Boomers age out of filk, or are younger generations retaining face-to-face values? I postulate that filkers of all generations retain many folk values, including a preference for face-to-face personal and musical interaction, though my research shows there is already a generational separation between older generations and Millennials in how they perceive and define filk. (end of p. 161)

I bring to this research my background in ethnomusicology, anthropology and folklore, almost 50 years as a musician and more than 30 years in the filk community. My husband and I have been inducted into the Filk Hall of Fame and have won several Pegasus Awards for Excellence in Filking. This is my first foray into formally writing about filk because of my embeddedness in the community. When I began my professional career, writing about one's culture or subculture was discouraged; things are different now. My research methods included participant and participant-observer techniques, a questionnaire and follow-up interviews. Further, I consulted online and print scholarship by filkers published in fanzines, e-books and professional journals. Specifics about data gathered by questionnaire and interview are detailed later in the article.

Filk since Jenkins

There is extensive documentation regarding the development of science fiction fandom from its first convention in 1939 onward (Coppa 2006: 41–59). Music was a part of this fandom from the

beginning, though filk as a musical genre and community started in the 1950s due to the rise of both the American Folk Music Revival and science fiction conventions (cons). The term 'filk' probably came from a typo of 'folk' in the early 1950s (Gold 1997: 1–2), and was rapidly embraced since it carried the idea of 'folk' but also marked a distinct music genre, context and community (McGath 2015). In spite of filk existing for 40 years before Jenkins examined it in 1992, his work exposed it to a wider academic audience.

But how has filk changed since? In 1992, filk was primarily an American activity. Active fandoms now exist also in Canada, England and Germany, with pockets in other countries (McGath 2015: 89–91); these extended communities support eight to ten international cons with considerable cross-country and international travel among them. Continuous online and personal contact has built an international community in which it is possible for eight people sharing a meal at a con to realize that they represent five countries and three continents. These community ties are strengthened by communication over the World Wide Web, which, though yet to be implemented in 1992, has developed rapidly in the decades since. Social media has likewise emerged, letting filkers form an online international community as they share music digitally. The web encouraged further growth of franchise-specific fandoms, which in turn gave birth to the newer styles of geek/nerd music, expanding fan music beyond filk. The relationship between filk and these musics is constantly being negotiated and redefined.

Jenkins ends his chapter on filk with the section 'Filk in Transition' (1992: 274–76), which discusses the growth of the analogue cottage filk recording industry, noting the growing worry

among adherents that filk would become too professional and abandon folk aesthetics. Today more filk recordings are indeed professional in quality as more professional and semi-professional musicians are filking. Still, 'home-grown' recordings are common and welcome, and filk of all musical levels is available on CD, by download and online. Styles have broadened beyond folk (e.g., rock, pop, jazz and rap), instruments have diversified beyond guitars, and there are more groups and bands. And, though a few Millennials are finding filk, filkers who were active 25 years ago remain active today, retaining the folk and face-to-face values of filk. (end of p. 162)

Defining filkers and filk

Anyone who self-identifies as and attends filk events is a filker, even if the person is not an active performer, thus the filk-community adage: 'They also filk, who only sit and listen'. The dichotomy of active performers and passive audience members rarely applies in filk; instead this boundary is blurred or erased. In filk there are few passive participants as people gather, not as audience members to see and hear performers, but as communal performers to make and enjoy music together, and everyone can fill a variety of roles over the course of an event. There are no stars (though there are acknowledged BNFs – big-name filkers), and everyone contributes, regardless of musical experience or ability, to create a satisfying community experience.

With the growth of online technology and media fandoms, it is important to differentiate between filk (created by and for the science fiction community, most often performed face to face) and other fannish musics. Geek/nerd music overlaps with science fiction, fantasy, gaming, comics, anime and steampunk communities, and franchise media fandoms have their own music, including wrock (wizard rock) and trock (Time Lord rock). Professional or semi-professional geek and nerd musicians often tour the independent circuits, while wrock, trock and similar bands perform at franchise-specific cons; both play at large media cons. These performers and their audiences generally do not know about or consider their music to be filk, though some nerd/geek music websites define filk as the first nerd/geek genre (Wikipedia 2015; Thehistoryfollower 2015). Conversely, some filkers are neither aware of nor participate in these parallel musics. Many filkers write songs about media franchise and geek topics, but the creator's intent and the performance context differentiates filk from these genres. Melissa Tatum has noted the differences between filk and wizard rock (2009), and the distinction between filk and non-filk in overlapping science fiction and nerd/geek/franchise communities is the topic of at least one dissertation in progress (Hayashi 2017). The biggest differences seem to be in terms of context (filk usually happens at smaller fan-run cons; nerd/geek/franchise music happens at large commercial, franchise-specific, or fan-run cons) and levels of participation (filk follows a folk music model, whereas nerd, geek and franchise music follows a commercial audience/performer model). Music not considered filk by its creators is outside the scope of this study.

The folk song process in filk

Born in the 1950s, filk still reflects much of the folk process in the way its music is created, audited and distributed (Jenkins 1992: 250–76). As the music of an avocational subculture, filk has its own customs and traditions, making it a distinct folk group where people interact creatively in person. Early filk songs set new lyrics to well-known folk tunes, many parodic in nature. While most filk songs have a single author, some are truly communal folk compositions; the venerable 'The Real Old Time Religion' has more than 250 verses and multiple contributors. Folklorist Edith Fowke details folk transmission and variation in her 1985 article 'Filksongs as modern folk songs', noting that many fans learned songs orally at cons, or used cassette recorders or copied words into notebooks. She states that texts acquired variations and lost and gained stanzas, and that singers sometimes did not know a song's author (1985: 85–94). Filkers still learn songs aurally and authorship still gets lost, but this is less common with commercial songbooks, CDs and digital sharing. (end of p. 163) Ownership remains mostly informal, though it is considered polite to ask before performing or recording another person's tune. Further, some filk songs have truly passed into the realm of folk song outside of the community. I was delighted to discover that my song 'Goin' Down the Cosmic Drain' was being sung at Boy Scout Jamborees, with new verses added in true folkloric fashion.

The online filk community

Science fiction fans, including filkers, are early adopters of technology. Filkers came online with ARPANET in the early 1980s, moving analogue media activities (e.g., fanzines) onto digital

platforms. Bulletin boards, newsgroups and listservs were created. On the analogue side, cassette tapes of live convention music and studio-produced tapes were distributed through cottage-industry publishers and individual musicians as early as the late 1970s. The intensified activity in online communication and sound recordings during the 1980s and 1990s aided in community growth and increased the interest in face-to-face musical activities.

Filkers now use all forms of online and digital technologies, including social media and music creation and distribution technologies. Facebook is a major platform, encompassing both general-topics page (Filker) and a promotional page for recordings and concerts (Filk Marketplace), as well as filk convention and personal pages. As of October 2015, the Filker Facebook page (the largest online filk platform) had more than 900 international members. Some older newsgroups and listservs have survived, while the LiveJournal blogging platform, once robust, is in decline. Filkers have created podcasts and websites. Music is distributed by CDs (which still sell well), downloads and streaming. Filkers crowdfund projects through Patreon and Kickstarter, and YouTube videos and live online concerts are available. Filkers use the digital environment to communicate, share and market music (McGath 2015: 58–64).

Why face-to-face values differ in filk and franchise media fandoms

In spite of digital connectivity, filkers across generations and geographic areas highly value meeting in person. Fandom researchers report that franchise media fans also value online and live interactions and social networks, but I postulate that the filk community prefers and values

face-to-face interaction more strongly. Franchises support and engage fans online with everything from interactive websites to stars' Twitter feeds; they promote the product, build the fan base and elicit feedback. Many media fans can have active avocational lives online, even if they never attend large commercial cons like Comic-Con, which drew over 130,000 people in 2015 (Comic-Con 2016), or Gen Con (2016), which drew 61,000.

In contrast, nobody courts filkers. It constitutes a niche fandom, since dedicated filkers worldwide are estimated to total 1000–1200, based on con attendance and online activity (though perhaps 2000–3000 more attend filk concerts at general cons). Filk is not commercially viable outside its community; thus it attracts no corporate interest (McGath 2015: 68–69). Filkers are eclectic and fickle, drawing song topics from franchises but also from general science fiction, science, space topics, computer culture, politics and their daily lives. Filk is a grass-roots fandom; the community has no franchise-supported fan sites, making in-person interaction more important. Filk cons have always (end of p. 164) been small – 30 to 250 people. This intimate size ensures that almost everyone at a con can be known individually. Further, the face-to-face and online filk communities overlap considerably; filkers know most of their social media contacts personally. This cannot be said of other media fandoms, especially internationally.

Filk as participatory fandom

The term 'participatory fandom' often describes fans who interact with a media text in ways that go beyond reading, watching or other passive engagement. I suggest that filkers have taken participatory fandom to an extreme by means that are only possible when a text is performed face to face, with the expectations and intent of building a real-time, spontaneous group performance and a communal co-creative experience. This immediate interaction with a text and other fans is profoundly different from the ways in which many media fan texts (e.g., fan fiction) are created and accessed. When a filker writes a song to be performed live in a small-group context, the interactive possibilities have just begun. The writer fully expects others to add harmonies, guitar parts, hand percussion or 'shtick' (in this case, comedic hand gestures, facial expressions and vocalizations), co-creating in real time a full group experience by communally embellishing the original text. This kind of socially satisfying, synchronous interaction is not yet feasible with today's technology.

At its best, the filk room is a special locus in space and time, created for and by the community, and is a safe, encouraging place for individual and group play, support and, most of all, co-creation and collaboration. At its core is a heightened group experience, created by active participation and immersive intensity with the goal of giving all participants a feeling of creative satisfaction and belonging. This seemingly utopic state is not always achieved, but it happens often enough that people deeply value the experience. I postulate that this face-to-face group creativity is unique in media fandom, though it has predecessors and parallels in other world folk performance forms (e.g., traditional West African dance circles where everyone is expected to sing and clap, and anyone can step into the centre to solo). In the filk room, and in other folk

performance forms, co-created group experience arises from the manipulation and eradication of the performer/audience boundary.

The fluid performer/audience boundary

Almost all western performing arts draw a clear line between audience and performer; performance venues provide separate spaces for each group, and each has expected roles and behaviours. Aram Sinnreich examines the artist/audience dichotomy in *Mashed Up*, discussing the social construction of these roles in western culture and how fandoms are breaking down the dichotomy (2010: 46–49). In his *Music as Social Life* (2008), Thomas Turino examines the audience–performer relationship through the concept of presentational and participatory music. Filk itself lies somewhere in the middle, and is most presentational in a concert setting where boundaries are more defined, and most participatory in the filk room, where boundaries are manipulated or erased. Turino defines the two main parameters of participatory music as inspiring participation and promoting social bonding (2008: 36); this is especially true for filk. Ethnomusicologists have documented musical events where the (end of p. 165) power to build community often comes from performer/audience interactions when the boundary between the two is disrupted or becomes fluid. For filkers this fluidity and permeability is only possible in person; it cannot happen yet in a technologically mediated environment.

Filking in participatory circles at cons usually begins around 10:00 p.m. and can last until dawn. Chairs are formed into a circle or concentric circles; there are no usually designated 'performer'

or 'audience' seats, spatially erasing role distinctions. Two styles of filk circles predominate today. The bardic circle is more democratic; each participant picks someone to perform, passes the turn to the next person or performs. The chaos circle functions on conversation logic. Players jump in as they can, following the previous song in some way, usually by topic or music style. The larger the group, the more chaotic the process, but ideally group members intervene to discourage 'filk hogging' and ensure that everyone gets a turn (McGath 2015: 11–12, 33–34). Based on my own participation in and observation of filking for more than 30 years, I offer the following observations on the fluid audience/performer boundary, which creates the communal participation so vital to the social bonding at the heart of filk.

Filk circle dynamics are fairly unique in media fandom as a form of face-to-face group creativity. The filk circle is similar to traditional western folk music gatherings, including Irish sessions and bluegrass picking parties, which are closer to small jam sessions. In the filk circle an individual can move among various roles over the course of an evening or even one song, electing to participate at whatever level is appropriate or desirable at the moment. In consecutive songs a performer may act as a leader, listener, instrumentalist (e.g., adding a rhythm guitar part to steady a foundering singer, or adding a lead line over a strong rhythm guitar part) or vocal contributor of a descant or back-up harmony. Thus, roles are fluid, self-selected and situational: primary and back-up, foreground and background.

Further, participants can make jokes or commentary, offer positive feedback to performers, or perform shtick. Some shtick has become part of a song's performance practice, though some

arises spontaneously and may or may not become attached to a song. During filk concerts, these behaviours are also expected, as are singing along, signing (American Sign Language) and dancing. Singing along at folk or rock concerts is common, but filkers tend to deliver four- (or more) part harmony, often sounding rehearsed. Songwriters, knowing that their audiences are highly responsive, include interactive spots where the audience can contribute.

In the filk circle, participants continuously negotiate their own positions in the fluid performer–audience interaction, co-creating a bounded social and creative time and space in which each person contributes. In the best and most satisfying filk circles, individual and group expression happens simultaneously. Each feeds and informs the other, so that the group comes close to a communal flow state. It is this real-time, deeply immersive sharing of a commonly created experience that builds and reinforces the strong sense of community among filkers, and is a major reason why face-to-face interaction remains of high value. The filk room is not always so utopic, and at times the circle does not go well: someone feels slighted, 'filk hogs' monopolize, song topics or themes are not to everyone's liking or the time between individual turns is too long in a large group. In these cases, people 'vote with their feet' and either join another circle or begin a new one. But more often than not (end of p. 166) the group self-polices and the magic happens, at least for a while, and the majority of people have a positive experience. The role of the fluid performer/audience boundary in building community bonds is further elucidated by the following questionnaire data.

Data across four generations and four countries

To reinforce the research I conducted over 30 years as a participant and participant-observer, in the summer of 2015 I created and distributed a questionnaire digitally to filkers eighteen years of age or older, with follow-ups by e-mail. Initially, I extended an invitation to participate in the study through Facebook, including the Filker page and several filk convention pages, as well as my personal page. I also e-mailed about 30 filking friends. At my request, people further distributed the invitation in the United States, Canada, England and Germany through all forms of social media. The questionnaire asked quantitative and qualitative questions, almost all open-ended. Quantitative questions elicited demographic information (gender identification, generation and geographical area), years of filk activity, the number of general and filk cons and house events attended annually and filk social media activity. Qualitative questions asked why people attended face-to-face filk events, why they participated in the online filk community, whether they preferred to interact with people and music in person or online, why people continue to seek out face-to-face interactions given their online connectivity and what they think filk might look like in 25–50 years in terms of face-to-face versus online preference.

I received 53 questionnaires between 14 July and 14 August 2015 from the United States, Canada, England and Germany. Respondents ranged in age from 23 to 75; further demographic information is shown below. I did not gather additional personal information for reasons of confidentiality. Given the estimate of around a thousand active filkers worldwide, just over 5 per cent participated. While not a large data pool, it seems reasonably to reflect the community distribution in terms of geographic area, gender identification and generation based on crowd-

sourced estimates from mailing lists, con attendance and social media platform memberships. It is likely that respondents were mostly 'core' filkers; more casual filkers may have been less likely to respond to the questionnaire, skewing the results towards the opinions of more active community members.

Generation

Silent Generation 1928–1945	3
Baby Boomer 1946–1964	27
Generation X 1965–1980	18
Millennial 1981–1997	5

Gender identity

Male	27
Female	25
Genderqueer	1

(end of p. 167)

Geographic origin

United States	32
Midwest = 14	
West Coast = 5	
South-east = 5	
North-east = 4	
West = 4	

Canada
 	
    Ontario and Manitoba = 8
 	
    British Columbia = 2
	10

England	6
Germany	5

Male/female representation was nearly equivalent, in contrast to media fandoms that are traditionally heavily female (e.g., fan fiction) or male (e.g., game modding) (Flegel and Roth 2014). Respondents ranged from those who self-identified as non-musicians (e.g., listeners or con organizers) to semi-professional and professional musicians who also perform outside the filk community. The large proportion of Midwest respondents (26.4 per cent) could be caused by several factors. The Midwest has the largest regional filk population, which supports the largest and oldest filk con in the United States in Columbus, Ohio (the Ohio Valley Filk Fest). I am best acquainted with Midwest filkers, so a larger proportion may have answered the questionnaire. Fewer responses from other geographic areas could have resulted from the fact that I did not have direct access to regional mailing lists and other avenues of communication, especially in Europe.

Respondents report having been filkers in some role from three to 50 years, averaging 22.7 years per person. This longevity is partially due to the large number of Baby Boomer and Gen-X respondents. Because filk is not tied to franchises, it enjoys a higher retention rate than other media fandoms where fans switch franchises and their communities more frequently.

Convention attendance ranges from zero to six general cons and zero to four filk cons per person annually, averaging out to 2.5 general cons and 1.9 filk cons per person. Almost all respondents attend science fiction and filk cons, but a few only attend one or the other due to interest or geographic proximity. Attendance is often based on proximity, especially for general cons; because there are many fewer filk cons, people will travel farther to attend. All respondents report attending at least one house filk or concert a year, and some attend up to fifteen annually. Again, attendance is based on proximity; house events occur in areas where more filkers live, but people will still travel several hours to a house event.

Almost half of the respondents discovered filk at a convention, usually through friends or family. A few first heard about it through convention postings in science fiction magazines, mentions in fanzines and books or through recordings. Several Millennials found filk online through overlapping fandoms or musicians. Though this pattern of discovery reflects generational changes in technology, the predominant form of discovery was at a convention or through friends (74.5 per cent), supporting the influence of in-person interaction.

How do filkers presently value face-to-face interaction versus online interaction? Almost all respondents – 98 per cent – still prefer interacting (end of p. 168) in person. Respondents were articulate and passionate on this subject, many describing the filk room as the heart or core of filking. Their reasons were similar, some writing eloquently about the richness of the person-to-person signal that cannot be duplicated through Skype or video streaming. The online environment cannot support the kind of spontaneity and creative exchange that can happen

when people share space and time, and this nexus of group creativity and communality is of the highest importance to community members. One filker reported including people in house filks via Skype, but the time lag made it impossible to sing along or interact in meaningful ways. Some respondents noted that songs performed in the filk room might never be recorded and thus could only be heard live. A Canadian filker summed up the thoughts expressed by the majority of respondents, writing that 'In the Internet age, it's increasingly important to spend real time talking to real people. The in-person spontaneity is a different experience and often contains some of the very human moments that are lost in an online exchange' (personal communication).

Online contact is appreciated but is considered a secondary level of engagement because of the technological mediation involved. Respondents enjoy keeping up with each other's lives, as well as continuing acts of creativity and community building online, but they recognize its limitations. Many participants responded with variants of 'I greatly prefer face-to-face contact but will take what I can get', since online communication with each other between cons is better than none. Online contact is especially important for those who cannot travel due to financial or health limitations or geographical isolation, though several filkers living in rural areas said a lack of bandwidth restricts their activities. Some communicate online to discover or plan upcoming filk events, even when they do not engage online in other ways. Others noted using social media to distribute their music, post lyrics and recordings, share performances and announce music releases or upcoming concerts (live or online).

With regard to live versus recorded or online music, almost all respondents said they greatly prefer live music in the filk room, at concerts and house events because of the rich interaction and emotional and creative engagement. Only two said they prefer recorded music over live music because of easy access; they can listen at any time or place. Most respondents, while appreciating the convenience, compared the difference to online versus face-to-face communication: recorded music is second best but it provides continuity between cons. Some appreciate both live and recorded filk for different reasons. They love the energy, spontaneity and sense of community found in live music but also enjoy the more polished studio-recorded songs; some learn most easily from recordings. Filkers diverged widely on the amount of recorded filk to which they reported listening. Some rarely listen to filk because they do not enjoy it outside of a live context. Others mix it with other genres or listen almost exclusively to filk. Still, the great preference is for live music.

Many filkers stated clear preferences for communicating online rather than offline when interacting with particular individuals or groups. For shy people, connecting online is more comfortable and helps them get to know people before meeting in person, but they still prefer the energy, support and camaraderie of live contact. Some reported easier online communication with individuals who have difficulty conversing in person due to social anxiety disorders, speech impediments or because they are non-neurotypical. (end of p. 169) The percentage of neurodivergent people with ADHD, Asperger's or autism seems to be higher in media fan communities, including filk; this topic calls for more study by those researching neurodiversity.

Other filkers noted various problems associated with online interactions. Some indicated that they preferred in-person interaction as a means of initially making friends. Women, in particular, like to meet in person at cons before allowing others into their online social space; as a safety issue, some only 'friend' people on Facebook after meeting personally. Several filkers found online communication too disjointed and interrupted, preferring instead dedicated, immersive face-to-face contact with friends. A recurrent theme among respondents was that because a higher-than-normal percentage of filkers have less-developed social skills, the chances of having online misunderstandings is higher, occasionally resulting in 'flame wars' (angry e-mail or social media exchanges). The richer, more complete signals people send and receive in person make for smoother, more accurate communication. Some reported knowing people who construct fictional online identities – almost costumes – that diverge from their in-person identities, sometimes significantly. Getting to know someone face to face helps one to understand another's online persona.

Many respondents consider the filk community to be their main social group outside of their families; some refer to it as their first or second family, and most of their social media and personal friends are filkers. Many added that only part of their interaction with filking friends had to do with filk, with their shared interests expanding to everyday lives, other fannish or creative activities, politics and world events. Respondents painted a picture of a deeply connected and supportive community that prefers in-person interaction whenever possible.

The future of filk – a generational divide

While Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers continue to maintain filk as a music and a community, with a history going back for almost 65 years, follow-up interviews with Millennials strongly suggest that there is already a generational division about what constitutes fannish music and its social context. Even though filk has a growing online presence, few fannish Millennials are aware of it as a music genre with a long history and associated community. Further, Baby Boomer and Gen-X filkers are usually only tangentially aware of the geek, nerd and franchise-specific music preferred by Millennials. The fannish music divide between older generations and Millennials suggests some likely directions for the future of filk and its face-to-face values as detailed in the questionnaires and follow-up interviews.

Respondents were asked to imagine where filk might be in 25–50 years regarding face-to-face versus online interaction. Since almost all were Baby Boomers or Gen-Xers, the answers were unsurprising. Many think music-making in person will always be a part of filking, even when technology allows for synchronous online music-making with no perceptible lag, though no one expects this soon. Some responded that improved technology could help filkers stay connected because of health, age or travel restrictions, though connecting through technology would remain a second choice. Others said that improved technology could become acceptable in situations like online concerts where they are audience members but not in filk circles because personal interaction is necessary for 'the magic' to happen. None saw filking (end of p. 170)

becoming an online-only fandom; the music and the face-to-face community values are inseparable.

Many respondents, across all generations, voiced an unprompted concern that filk is not replenishing its ranks with younger members as Baby Boomers age. The problem is not demographic; Millennials have outnumbered Baby Boomers since 2010 (Pew Research Center 2015). I explored this concern by subsequently asking Millennials and their parents, through social media and e-mail correspondence, why so few Millennials are interested in filk. Some who were raised in filking households participate in filk, but many do not, though they may participate in other musical or fannish activities. A filking parent of Millennials noted that his children have some interest, but they have a multitude of competing hobbies and activities (personal communication). Millennials who filk seem to have embraced the aesthetics and values of the filk circle, though some also participate in other media fandoms and fan musics.

I asked Millennials who filk, along with those who do not but whose parents do, to answer the question for their fannish peers or themselves. They stated that they or their peers generally do not participate because they have never found filk; they do not usually attend traditional science fiction cons where filk happens, and there is no filk at the larger media cons they prefer. Several Millennials mentioned that they save their limited money to attend one large, expensive media con annually rather than several small, inexpensive fan-run cons (personal communication). If Millennials find filk online, one respondent said it is identified broadly as geek, nerd or franchise music; Millennials do not realize it is called filk or that it has its own

community (personal communication). When they do recognize filk for what it is, they tend to either find the learning curve for understanding the music and culture too steep, or consider it passé and boring as something belonging to older generations. Further, many filk traditions and songs were created by older generations whose folk and face-to-face values and musical aesthetics do not appeal to Millennials; this large body of arcane knowledge (which marks a folk group) separates insiders from outsiders, creating a barrier around the music and its community. Because filk references a broad range of science fiction and general topics, Millennials report that they do not get the generation-specific references or jokes. The newer franchise-centred fandoms are much easier to enter and understand; for example, Millennials grew up with the *Harry Potter* series, making wizard rock much more accessible.

One Millennial child of filking parents spoke for many of her peers in stating why she does not participate:

> 1) Filk seems more prevalent at smaller cons, but younger people attend cons that are bigger, like Anime Central or C2E2 [comics], where there is no filk presence. 2) Filk rooms I've been in are pretty much older people and we don't feel comfortable butting into that, especially when most of the music is old-feeling (based on folk style), repetitive (boring), and not based on media or topics we relate to. 3) I think Millennials would prefer the act of creating and collaborating on music and lyrics, bouncing ideas off each other, and sharing the process rather than having prepared performances and

politely taking turns in a slow-moving room. The typical open filk room is not an energy

we enjoy. (personal communication) (end of p. 171)

Older generations and Millennials approach and define their fannish musics differently.

Millennial informants remarked that they tend to prefer large media cons featuring geek, nerd

or franchise music concerts, and they engage with these musics and musicians online as well.

They do not have an opportunity to play music together at these cons since no Millennial

tradition has yet emerged similar to filking. Instead, Millennials share the recorded music they

create with their online communities. If Millennials find filk online, they define it broadly as

fannish music because they do not know about filk as a genre or a community.

Baby Boomer and Gen-X filkers, however, tend to regard playing and listening to live music with

others as the most authentic and rewarding experience. Though they most value sharing music

face to face at fan-run cons, more are putting their music online to make it accessible primarily

to the broader filk community. Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers may know about geek, nerd or

franchise music and may even borrow tunes to perform in the filk room, but most filkers

recognize it as different from filk because it was not written inside the community; for them,

filk music and the filk community cannot be separated (McGath 2015: 13–14; 97–98). This

clearly defined generational split in music preferences and expectations will likely determine

the future direction and definition of filk.

Filk in 25 years—a prognosticatory conclusion

In the almost 25 years since Jenkins described the filk community (1992), it has retained its folk roots and the older generational preference for making music face to face. Still, it has a new presence online, where Millennials hear it and, not knowing its history and context, consider it part of their larger geek, nerd and franchise genres. Where will filk be in 25 more years, when Baby Boomers will be in their 70s, 80s and 90s, Gen-Xers in their 60s and 70s, and Millennials middle-aged? The most likely scenario (though a pessimistic one) is that smaller fan-run cons will disappear due to financial insolvency as older generations leave, taking traditional filk with them, though filk may well continue online under the broader umbrella of geek, nerd and franchise music and possibly still be practiced traditionally by a small group of ageing Gen-Xers and Millennials. If there comes a day when filk is no longer practiced face to face, though the music has an online presence, will it still be filk? Filkers today would probably answer in the negative because their notion of filk cannot exist without a personal context. Gary McGath postulates a more optimistic view if technology can overcome the lag-time problem to allow for virtual filk circles with group participation. McGath writes, 'The essential thing is encouragement of personal creativity and participation at all levels. If this remains, it's still filk, and it has a bright future' (2015: 103). Interestingly, my questionnaire, and my presentation of the data back to the community at a panel during the 2015 Ohio Valley Filk Fest, has motivated larger community conversations about the future of filk beyond replacing older generations. It will be informative to see how these conversations shape and define filk in the next 25 years.

Right now, though, one thing is certain: the filk community holds tightly to the traditional folk practices and face-to-face values that have defined it across four generations and at least four countries. While filkers have been using the Internet from its inception and share their songs through the Web, they still prefer to interact with people and music in person. Jenkins' definition (end of p. 172) of filk as folk music still pertains today. The folkloric concepts of communal creation and re-creation (as well as *recreation*) are embodied in the participative values of the filk room, where each person ideally helps to create a satisfying group experience. The boundaries between audience and performer are fluid, and the all-inclusive power of the circle is invoked to create a transformational nexus in space and time. One filker documented filk's retention of folk practices and values into the digital age while relating a conversation from January 2001 with a professional folk musician attending her first filk. The folk musician remarked, 'You're sitting around, swapping songs, and everyone gets a chance to play. I've been going to folk music conventions for years, but you people are actually *doing* folk music' (personal communication).

Where will filk be in another 25 years? Given the rapid change in technology and its impact on culture, especially on Millennials and the generations that will follow, will there be a filk community in the future and will it still value face-to-face interaction? Many of my respondents answered yes; they believe that music is best when made or heard in person, within a supportive community, and that this basic human preference will not change. One filker summed up the community's values succinctly: 'A *hug* is not a *hug*' (personal communication).

Acknowledgements

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Suggested citation

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