REAL PERSON FANFICTION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE (UN)ETHICAL FAN

LAUREN NICOLE BALSER UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

ABSTRACT

Real person fanfiction (RPF) has a tumultuous history within academia and fandom. Though RPF remains a staple of fandom, the fans that write and read it are often moralised for their alleged misunderstanding of what constitutes a fictional character. Consequently, much of RPF studies focuses on fans' construction of the celebrity persona. Though important, this focus on celebrity persona is prioritised over the role that RPF plays in constructing the persona of the (un)ethical fan. The act of reading, writing, and discussing RPF is not just about constructing the celebrity persona—it is equally, and always, concerned with constructing and performing the fannish persona, particularly along moral lines. This article uses the Taskmaster *fandom as a case study, as the British comedy panel show—whose presenters enact a dominant/submissive dynamic via their* Taskmaster *personas—blurs the boundary between fiction and reality both on and off the show, making its fannish spaces ripe with discussion of fan ethicality, the construction of (un)ethical celebrity, and fan persona. Simultaneously,* Taskmaster's *presenters' explicit discussion of RPF written about them, and the response of the fandom to this discussion, shines light on how fans view their own moral positionality and how they construct (un)ethical fan personas. In investigating this fandom's performance of what they call "ethical RPF", this article seeks to theorise the construction of an (un)ethical fan persona as innately intertwined with RPF as a practice and fans' treatment of it as moral performance.*

KEY WORDS

Real Person Fanfiction; Moral Performance; *Taskmaster*; Squick; Celebrity

INTRODUCTION

In the fifteenth series of British panel show *Taskmaster* (2015-), Alex Horne says to his co-host, "There is a fair amount of fanfiction in this show about you and I, Greg". His co-host, Greg Davies, says to the audience, "Yeah, there is. Do you know there's just lots of stories imagining Alex and I as lovers online?" Alex reads the titles of some of the fanworks, and they move on. Predictably, the fandom did not. A clip of this interaction made its way around various social media platforms and sparked conversation across the fandom about Real Person Fanfiction (RPF)—fanfiction written about "real people" as opposed to fictional characters—as well as its ethics and the ethics of RPF within the *Taskmaster* fandom specifically. RPF, previously relegated to one area of the fandom, was now at the front and centre of fannish communication, the subject of fannish fascination, and the fannish persona itself.

Though a substantial body of work on RPF focuses on fans' construction of the celebrity persona and star image, I wish to focus here on an area within RPF studies that is severely

lacking: the construction of a fannish persona through RPF. RPF studies typically positions celebrity persona as the main interest of RPF fans; however, it is unnecessarily prioritised over *fannish* persona, particularly fannish *(un)ethical* persona.

Crucially, whether or not RPF or the fans engaging with it are ethical is not the question I wish to engage with here—rather, I wish to engage with the question of how the fans who interact with RPF *discuss* its ethicality and the role that those fannish discussions and embodiments of ethicality play in the formation of the fannish persona. My intent in analysing the relationship between RPF and persona is to consider how fans frame ethicality, what ethical issues fans are interested in in the first place, and what topics and themes are included in moral performance. Further, by moral performance, I do not mean to suggest that fans are virtue signalling in their discussions of RPF (though an argument could certainly be made that *some* fans are). Moral performance, in this context, is a way of describing the various mechanisms fans use to demonstrate their understandings of ethicality to others, the themes wrapped up in performance (e.g., reality as a moral virtue), and their relation to (subjects of) fandom. I emphasise this point so as to not paint fans as wrapped up in the performance of their morality only for others or only to paint themselves in a "positive" light for status seeking purposes (Westra 2021, p. 156). Fans come to these issues in the context of sociality, but the issues are close at heart for them nonetheless (Sprott 2022, p. 635). As such, when I say that fans treat RPF as a moral performance, it is meant to highlight how the practice itself is a mechanism of performing reality and ethicality, of constructing the (un)ethical fan persona. It is not an accusation.

The *Taskmaster* fandom, with its fannish object's propensity for narrativisation and subverting genre convention, offers us a useful entry point into this discussion. The presenters' explicit discussion of RPF written about them, and the response of the fandom to this discussion, shines light on how fans view their own moral positionality and how they construct their own ethical fan personas. Here, I examine this moral positionality through the discourse *about* these fannish texts—primarily through author's notes, tags, and comments on Archive of Our Own, as well as discussions on other social media platforms—to emphasise how RPF fans' positionality is structured through their paratextual and extratextual practices. Because much of RPF studies focuses on the celebrity persona via the RPF text, I focus on the para- and extratextual to shift attention on RPF to the level of fan discourse and practice, rather than primarily or only through the fanfiction itself.

As such, this article is an exploration of what I call the *(un)ethical fan persona*. The reading, writing, and discussing of RPF can be understood as a performance of (un)ethical fannish persona, whereby fans come to understand and present themselves and others as (un)ethical actors within fan spaces via a relation to what is felt and/or perceived as "wrong"

A BRIEF CULTURAL AND ACADEMIC HISTORY OF RPF

At the most granular level, RPF is fanfiction written about "real people". The first recorded RPF in the modern incarnation of the term comes from *Star Trek* fans' 1968 "Visit to a Weird Planet" in *Spockanalia 3*, which transported characters to the set of *Star Trek* (Lorrah and Hunt). In the decades that followed, RPF became a staple of many fandoms, from bands such as Duran Duran and The Beatles to *The Lord of the Rings* actors.

Fans are keenly aware of the reception of their practices by producers (Bennett, Chin, and Jones 2016), fellow fans (Gonzalez 2016; Larsen and Zubernis 2012), and, in some cases, academics. For instance, the editorial introduction to a 2004 Lotrips (*Lord of the Rings* Real

People Slash) fanzine responds directly to Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*, and is critical of lines drawn between fiction and reality that moralise RPF fans:

> Just as Frodo and Sam are 'communal characters' existing in our cultural narrative, so are Elijah [Wood] and Sean [Astin]… Perhaps [RPF fans] could consider ourselves a level closer to the bone when we resist cultural norms presented in celebrity narratives—which are marketed as 'real' to us—than when we engage in 'fiction'. (Hope 2004, p. 2)

In the twentieth anniversary edition of *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins acknowledges that "[s]ome forms of slash were fandom's 'dirty little secret'" in the 1980s and 90s, and that fans asked him not to write about RPF (2013, p. xxxiii). This original reluctance to engage with RPF due to fans' concerns highlights the potential for moralised reception in fannish, popular, and academic spheres.

In fanzines of the late 1990s and early 2000s, fans attempted to pre-empt potentially moralising reception through disclaimers (a practice which continues today); for instance, one Beatles fan wrote:

> [This is] also a slash novel, meant for a specific community of readers (and we all understand the game rules of the art form) and not for the reading public… To Beatlefans who may have happened across this: unless you're a slash reader, this is not for you". (de la Lune 2005, p. 1)

Even though the author is also a Beatles fan, there is a line drawn between Beatles RPF/slash fans and Beatlefans, who ostensibly do not "understand" or "get" this particular side of fandom. Similar tensions exist in contemporary fandom spaces, but RPF is popular enough on Archive of Our Own that two of the ten most popular fandoms in 2023 were RPF, and men's football RPF qualified as the fifteenth most active fandom on the platform (toastystats 2024).[i] Despite its reputation and reception, RPF is alive and well in fandom, and has been for many decades.

Previous research into RPF has often focused on the construction of the celebrity persona by fans, or their queering or curating of star image. For instance, Jennifer McGee, one of the earliest scholars to analyse RPF, argued that RPF authors engage with and are driven by an ethic of dialogue and consumption, treating "real people" as character or commodity. She suggested that the ethical challenge of the new millennium "may be to find ways to make dialogue between real people as meaningful as that between real and fictional" (2006, p. 176). Since then, other scholarship on RPF and celebrity persona has analysed: the debated ethical status of writing RPF and conceptions of celebrity (Thomas 2014); RPF as a "docufantasy" mode of celebrity representation (Piper 2024); effects of constant access to celebrity on RPF as practice (Hagen 2015); what happens when "the RP gets in the way of the F", or, what happens when the celebrity does or is alleged to have done something (e.g., rape) that drives such a wedge between the real and (fan)fictionalised versions of themself that fans can no longer mentally compartmentalise (Popova 2021); paradoxical practices in Chinese RPF fans' treatment of slash and sexuality (Zhang 2021); the construction of political candidates via RPF (Winter 2020); the construction of celebrity bromance via RPF (Lam and Raphael 2022); the appropriation of the celebrity body for fictional characters' characterisation (McClellan 2018); and the celebrity in RPF as an instigator who asks fans to breach "authenticity ethics" in a kind of queer, transgressive play (Sprott 2022). Other work has interrogated the relationship between RPF and fannish performance of relationships and sexuality (Busse 2006) and RPF as a sociotechnically distinct and digital medium (Fathallah 2017).

Scholars have long pointed out the prevalence of ethical debates about RPF (McGee 2005; Thomas 2014; McClellan 2018), but scholarship has not critically investigated the relationship between this debate and fan persona. Zoë Erin Sprott makes a compelling argument for the inclusion of fan ethics in scholarly discussion of RPF, arguing that fans' ethicality should be a key concern in RPF studies, but should not be the *sole* or even primary focus; instead, how fans and celebrities/creators interact with ethics is what matters (Sprott 2021, p. 635). RPF fans are actively interested and involved with ethics and the questions surrounding them, and they are often just as engaged with the question of dialogue and the ethics of it as scholars. It is this approach to ethics and RPF that I build on, analysing how fannish reading, writing, and discussing of RPF contribute to the (co-)construction of not only the celebrity persona, but the *(un)ethical fannish* one.

ETHICS OF CITING FANS AND FANFICTION

As of the time of writing, there are just under 1,500 fanfictions in the *Taskmaster* tag on Archive of Our Own; of those, just over 1,000 are Greg Davies/Alex Horne fanfictions. In this article, I look at fanworks specifically mentioned on *Taskmaster* or elsewhere by Davies and Horne, the top fifteen kudosed (i.e., liked) and commented on fanfictions, and any fanworks referenced frequently in fandom discussion. This selection represents both popular fanfictions in the RPF community and fanfictions brought to the broader fandom via the show's presenters; the latter is especially important for understanding the relationship between the fourth wall break by the presenters and resulting mechanisms of moral performance by *Taskmaster* RPF fans.

I consider a number of ethical factors in citing these fanfictions and the comments on them. *Taskmaster* fans, like all fans, operate with certain expectations regarding visibility. These expectations have been violated in the past by Horne and Davies, and while this is part of what makes the fandom such an interesting case study, I do not wish to "out" fans. Ethics of citing digital fandom in this project are informed by guidelines from the Association of Internet Researchers (namely, feminist ethics of care [franzke 2020]) and the expectations and history of *Taskmaster* fandom. As such, I do not include the usernames/pseudonyms of fans I quote, nor do I include information traditionally requested of digital sources, such as hyperlinks to fanfictions. Similarly, I do not directly cite fan communication on the social media platforms observed (Reddit, YouTube, and Twitter/X); I either refer to a community (e.g., the r/taskmaster subreddit) or reference a fan's (medium of) communication anonymously. Additionally, I do not quote fans extensively, though I make rare exceptions when a comment or post is particularly public-facing and its full context is necessary for comprehension. I provide the general date when necessary for clarity, but overall do my best to maintain levels of anonymity to honour fans' expectations of visibility and for fan protection.

"DRILLING DOWN INTO THE NARRATIVE" OF *TASKMASTER*

In *Taskmaster*, five celebrity contestants (typically comedians) complete ridiculous tasks, ranging from writing and performing a song about a random woman to moving water from one bucket to another without moving the buckets. Tasks are pre-filmed at a former groundskeeper's cottage in London (known as the "Taskmaster House") followed by a live studio record where contestants watch their task attempts together in front of an audience and the show's co-presenters, Greg and Alex.[ii] In each episode, the Taskmaster—Greg—scores the task attempts with help from the Taskmaster's Assistant—Alex, referred to by Greg as "Little Alex Horne". After pre-filmed tasks are watched and scored, contestants compete in a "live task", completed in studio in front of the audience, Greg, and Alex. After this final task, the contestant

with the most points that episode is crowned the episode winner, and the format repeats in the next episode. At the end of the series, a champion is crowned based on points accumulated throughout the entire series.

Improvisation and wit are central to the panel show format and thus *Taskmaster*. Panel shows generically are not beholden to scripts or narrative, nor are they strictly quiz/game shows, as "competition is of secondary importance and often of no consequence", most often used to display wit (Hunt 2013, pp. 44-45). The point is to let a rotating panel of celebrities riff off each other to entertain through their improvisation; the competition and points might help to structure this, but the points "can be arbitrary to the point of impenetrable" (Hunt, 2013, 45).

Though *Taskmaster* is a panel show, it differs via subversion of these traditional properties, leading to narrativisation. Importantly, *Taskmaster* does not rotate its cast every episode as with other panel shows; the same five celebrity contestants are present for the entire series. Horne—*Taskmaster*'s creator and producer—described the format as "breaking the mould", saying that broadcasters "didn't think viewers would tune in the next week to see the same comedians, so we had to persuade them *it was more like a sitcom than the panel show*" ('Why Taskmaster was a hard sell…' 2017, emphasis mine). This meant the show had to be recorded and transmitted in the same order, with one director at Dave (the channel that hosted *Taskmaster* from 2015 until they switched to Channel 4 in 2020) saying that the show had to be made "as a soap" ('Why Taskmaster was a hard sell…' 2017). *Taskmaster*, as such, is both a panel show and a narrative "sitcom" and "soap", where the competition is of lesser importance than the comedy, but still produces an overarching series narrative. Though a viewer could watch a one-off episode of *Taskmaster*, they would lose out on aspects of the show that watching the entire series affords. Viewers come back every week to see what will happen *next*, not only to see *what* will happen.

Aside from its more narrative approach to format, however, *Taskmaster* narrativises in another, more crucial way: within the diegetic frames of the show, there is a *Taskmaster* universe wherein Greg and Alex—as Taskmaster and Taskmaster's Assistant—engage in a dominant/submissive and daddy/boy dynamic; Greg and Alex make constant reference to it on the show, creating a storyworld around what happens in the "Taskmaster House".

Since early series, Greg and Alex have played into their *Taskmaster* personas. They make reference to what happens "when we're at home"; in series four episode seven, for instance, Greg tells the contestants, "What I like to do when we're at home is to send Alex off to hide and then I go on holiday". They use pet names and endearments constantly, ranging from tamer choices like "sweet young prince", "cutie", and "my love" to the more sexual "good boy", "lovely pretty boy", or "daddy". On numerous occasions, they have made explicit and implicit reference to the two of them having sex, and contestants frequently remark on the pair's on-screen relationship. For instance, series sixteen contestants made several references to the dynamic in Channel 4 press for the show, referring to Alex and Greg's relationship as being "[l]ike a lot of marriages" ('Q&A with Julian Clary' 2023) and full of "psycho-sexual, emotional torture" ('Q&A with Susan Wokoma' 2023). Another said, "They're an odd couple. If you told me that they'd had sex, I would believe that" ('Q&A with Lucy Beaumont' 2023). To top it all off for fans invested in the dynamic, the two actually kissed in series six, which was later uploaded to a compilation created by the official *Taskmaster* YouTube channel entitled 'Taskmaster's Most Romantic Moments' (2021).

The dynamic extends to extradiegetic media as well. For example, at the 2022 National Comedy Awards, when accepting an award for Best Comedy Entertainment Show, Greg hands Alex a pre-written speech using falsified "backstage conversations I've had with [Alex] over the

years"; Alex acts visibly uncomfortable and confused, and Greg commands him to read, "All of it! Loud!" ("Alex Horne's HILARIOUS Speech" 2022). Additionally, fans are able to use the real lives of Davies and Horne as inspiration when it is incorporated into their dynamic on *Taskmaster*, complicating the "patchwork" (Popova 2021, p. 95) informational canon of RPF. For instance, on one occasion, they both tweeted the same photo of them on the beach with Alex smiling happily and Greg staring blankly at the camera like he would rather be anywhere else. To this, Alex added the caption, "Having the time of my life. #blessed" (Horne 2022), while Greg added, "Worst. Summer. Ever" (Davies 2022). In an outtake from series sixteen posted over a year later by the official *Taskmaster* YouTube channel, Greg says, "We did have a week by the sea. It was nice actually. His pesky wife got in the way a little bit" ("Sam spills the beans on Greg's secret holiday with Alex" 2023). Both the tweets and outtake inspired fannish activity, with one fan in the r/taskmaster subreddit joking that they could almost hear the fanfiction being written on the day Davies and Horne tweeted, and another commenting on the outtake, "Must… resist urge to… write fanfictions".

Through these various performances of their Taskmaster and Taskmaster's Assistant personas in *Taskmaster* and extradiegetic appearances, Davies and Horne can "move between acting and being—and keep the same name" (Mills 2010, p. 200), a move that is ripe for the whims of fanfiction-writing fans. As Greg often puts it when inquiring into contestants' performances, fans are able to "drill down into the narrative" of Greg and Alex's relationship via RPF and discussions of it. Just as *Taskmaster* lends itself to narrativisation through its subversion of the genre format, Greg and Alex's relationship lends itself to narrativisation through performances of persona by Davies and Horne—both forms of narrativisation create a space that lends itself to RPF, a feature of the show's fandom that has been openly discussed by the presenters since 2019.

Taskmaster's treatment of RPF impacts how fans view their own practices and moral identities in relation to RPF. When Horne and Davies discuss RPF written about them, subsequent discourse and actions in the fandom shine light on how fans view their own moral positionality and how they construct (un)ethical fan personas. The first mention of *Taskmaster* fanfiction by either presenter occurred in September 2019, when Davies appeared as a guest on Horne's musical comedy podcast, *The Horne Section Podcast*. In the episode, Horne has the two of them sing a smutty poem written about them by a fan, which he found on Archive of Our Own. When the song ends, Horne says, "So, that's our relationship", to which Davies responds incredulously, "I mean, it's sort of fascinating, isn't it, because it's clearly by someone who's deranged" ("Greg Davies" 2019). When the fan author became aware of the *Horne Section* performance, they added an author's note on their work with a link to the podcast episode, clarifying that they had no hand in the poem's appearance on the podcast:

> I'm an old school RPFer who would never shove my RPF in the face of the people I was writing about bc [because] that's just gross, let alone ask them to turn it into a song for me jfc [Jesus fucking Christ]. *This is was* [sic] *all Alex's idea, not mine. I am in no way responsible for this*. (emphasis mine)

In the years following the episode, Davies and Horne have continued to make reference to RPF about them on other podcasts, interviews, and *Taskmaster* itself. In series fifteen episode three, Alex explicitly names some of the fanfiction, shattering a fourth wall in RPF fandoms, where RPF—as the fan above suggests—is not to be shared with the people it is about, often referred to as a first rule of fandom (Larsen & Zubernis 2012, p. 1). This explicit mention of fanfiction made many non-RPF *Taskmaster* fans realise that *Taskmaster* RPF existed in the first place, increasing its visibility in other corners of the fandom. As such, *Taskmaster* fans and creators are quite cognisant of RPF's visibility; in the 2024 *Taskmaster New Year Treat*, for instance, after

Greg and Alex join hands to walk across the stage, Greg says, "That's not going to help those rumours on the internet". RPF is brought into the diegetic components of the show and portrayed as "rumours", rather than a practice in a subsection of the fandom. The show's presenters do not shy away from talking about or interacting with it, even as they sometimes disparage it. Simultaneously, fans are concerned about the ethical questions involved, attempting to answer questions of reality and visibility in fan spaces while constructing and performing an (un)ethical fan persona.

Davies and Horne, then, might be considered instigators, celebrities who engage in dialogue with their fans by encouraging them to participate in a breach of authenticity ethics via queer transgressive play (Sprott 2022, p. 640). In this space of play, there are lower ethical stakes for fans, where they can parse through ethical issues of identity in a meaningful way. Whether Davies and Horne intend to or not, *Taskmaster* and its various forms of narrativisation cultivate a relationship to RPF fandom where this cycle of play is prioritised, drawing from and elevating forms of (digital) identity play that are unique to RPF (Busse 2017; Piper 2024; Sprott 2022).

The process of participatory identity formation, then, is not just a process of fannish curation and creation of the celebrity persona—as fans make sense of their relationship to celebrity persona and/or RPF as a practice, they simultaneously create a fannish persona that is based in relation to the alleged moral status of RPF. Put differently, RPF is never just about how the fan sees the celebrity; it is, however, about how the fan sees *themself*. This dialogue with fans, subjects of fandom, and the practice of RPF is what leads to the creation of the (un)ethical fan persona, a performative representation of the fannish relation to alleged (im)morality of a particular fan practice.

Within *Taskmaster* RPF fandom, there are two significant mechanisms of constructing and performing the (un)ethical fan persona at play. In the first, fans construct their (un)ethical persona through direct creation of the celebrity persona, whereby the performance of morality is directly intertwined with representations of the celebrity persona (particularly Alex's). In the second, fans construct their (un)ethical persona through positing *Taskmaster* RPF as a moral exception. In both mechanisms, the fan's (un)ethical persona is forged in relation to perceived or actual opposition to the practice of RPF.

"Hi, Alex, you little shit!": Performing the ethical fan persona through participatory formation of the celebrity identity

Previous research into fan personas suggests that fans construct their own personas through the subject of their fandom. Pilar Lacasa et al. argue that fans construct their own identities by addressing the celebrity persona; in their view, this "construction is mixed with feelings of admiration and affection for the celebrity" (Lacasa, et al. 2017, p. 55). Though this may be true for the teenage music fans they base their analysis in, for *Taskmaster* RPF fans constructing a fannish persona, the connection to the celebrity persona is also mixed with feelings of potential moralisation for misunderstanding "reality". Though Horne tends to approach RPF with a kind of interest or amusement, on various occasions RPF fans have been referred to by Greg/Davies as "deranged" ('Greg Davies' 2019), as well as "perverts" and "disgusting" ('Series 17 Outtakes—Part 1' 2024). Both have gone on record as saying they do not "see" what fans "see" in their on-screen relationship, with Davies saying "it's more of a stern father and son relationship" ('Greg Davies & Alex Horne' 2020) in response to being asked about RPF about the two. As such, the production of the ethical fan persona becomes a matter of performative regulation (Scott 2011, p. 6) related to "realness" and the morality tied to fannish conceptualisations of the "real".

A common refrain in RPF written across all fandoms is the disclaimer that the work is fiction, or only *based* on real people's personae, not implicating the real person themself. Though this disclaimer is not a prerequisite for all RPF fans/fans who ship "real people" (Tiffany 2022, pp. 203-216), within the *Taskmaster* fandom, there is a near-universal acknowledgement that fans are engaging with the personas of Greg and Alex—as Taskmaster and Taskmaster's Assistant—not the "real" people of Davies and Horne. To demonstrate this, *Taskmaster* RPF authors add notes on the Archive with phrases like, "this is allllllll [sic] made up and not real", "P.s. as always, this is not real! It's pure fiction", "Everything is fictional (un)fortunately", or "As usual.. [sic] this is a 100% made up, very fake story for funsies". These notes, all forms of dramaturgical circumspection (Goffman 1956, p. 218), present awareness of RPF's status within *Taskmaster* fandom and within fannish and popular spaces more broadly, pre-emptively distancing their ethical performance from perceived "wrong" forms of RPF which misunderstand the "realness" of celebrity persona.

Phrases like "as always" or "as usual" serve as indicators that these authors *consistently* engage in distancing from "wrong" forms of RPF which presume the realness of the people or scenarios fans write about. These disclaimers are arguably no longer necessary after RPF has been a staple of fandom for several decades. It should generally be presumed that these attitudes hold across fannish spaces; if anything, fans should leave notes when they believe their stories *actually* happened, since that would be more of an outlier. Disclaimers no longer serve to distinguish between reality and fiction, but to establish the moral distance of the author (and readers, in engaging with the work) from the ethical "issues" of RPF. This, in turn, turns "reality" into a moral virtue; fans create a moral high ground only accessible by establishing the pure fictionality of their own creations, positing *themselves* and their persona as in the "real world" through their acknowledgement of their works' fictionality.

By clearly defining their RPF as fictional, RPF fans mould themselves into symbols of virtue and ethicality, anchored firmly in the "real world" and away from the stigma and scolding of non-RPF fans or the subjects of their fandom. To outsiders, a disclaimer demonstrates awareness of the fictionality of fannish imaginings writ large. To insiders (i.e., fellow RPF fans), a disclaimer is a mechanism of performative regulation, the dramaturgical enactment of monitoring and sanctioning oneself and peers to simultaneously present oneself as ideal and to "appraise each other's claims to authenticity" (Scott 2011, p. 6). It ensures that they are performing fandom "right", that they are not beholden to an *un*ethical fan persona, a problematic "other" who does not know the line between fiction and reality.

These instincts in identity management derive from trends in fandom history that rely on gaslighting or otherwise demeaning fans for the "unrealness" and "obsessiveness" of their fannish tendencies. For instance, there is a long history of queerbaiting fans that can be understood as a form of gaslighting fans about what they are perceiving as "real" (Church 2023, p. 221; Brennan 2019, pp. 15-19). As such, fans work to produce an ethical fan persona that demonstrates knowledge of fictionality and reality. An unethical fan persona, therefore, blurs these lines in a serious manner; the ethical fan might joke about the lines being blurred, but they must perform knowledge of what is "real".

With works specifically mentioned on *Taskmaster* episodes and outtakes (which are treated as equally valuable in the patchwork RPF canon), we can similarly see realigning actions—"temporary unofficial, or controlled, realignments, often aggressive in character" (Goffman 1956, p. 190)—used to familiarise non-RPF fans or Horne himself with the work due to the decontextualisation of the works on *Taskmaster*. For instance, the author of a fanfiction mentioned in outtakes added an author's note after the fact:

> Hi, Alex, you little shit! (affectionate). I know the 'Alex Don't Read This' tag is probably like catnip to you, but really? Along with all the other tags on THIS FIC IN PARTICUALR??? You are insane. Love you! (PS, if Ed [Gamble] and James [Acaster] mention this, I will be blaming you.)

This note is playfully aggressive and expressive, placing a sense of blame on Alex, rather than the author, but ultimately still reaffirming their fannish love for Alex/Horne. The tags similarly serve as realigning actions; the author originally tagged their work with *Alex Horne Please Don't Read This*, a tag used in about five percent of *Taskmaster* fanfiction. After Alex mentioned the above fan's fanfiction, the author added several new tags riffing on the earlier one—*Alex Horne's current favorite fanfic*, *bc* [because] *he DOESN'T READ THE TAGS*, *And He Is A Little Shit*, *(i say with great affection)*. These tags represent a performative attempt to engage with Horne, to regain fannish agency by inviting Horne into the fannish dynamic and establishing him as a fannish "rule breaker". In doing so, fans draw Horne into the realm of (im)morality to establish a fannish ethical persona intertwined with his.

Even works that are not featured on *Taskmaster* or its outtakes feature variations of *Alex Horne Please Don't Read This* to place a sense of onus or agency on Horne and implicate him in a fannish social contract, to make the ethical fan persona a reflection of *Horne's* actions and persona. For instance, fans vary the tag in a number of ways, daring Alex to include their work in the show's banter, telling him their work has all his favourite tags, or asking him to send them money if he reads their work. In each of these variations, fans use the same tactics—faux aggression, played jokes, kidding, expressive overtones (Goffman 1956, p. 190)—to implicate Horne into fandom. After all, if Horne has favourite tags or is likely to incorporate the work into the show himself, how much more "moral" is he than fans?

Though few works are tagged with *Alex Horne Can Read This*, the variations highlight this social contract, as well. Such variations tell him that he is allowed to read so long as he shows it to Greg, suggest that their fanfiction may be tame compared to his "previous reading habits", or ask him to leave feedback if he wants to read their work. These tags, similarly to the ones that tell him not to read fanfiction, ask or tell him to become "part" of the RPF community; fans jokingly assume Horne reads fanfiction somewhat consistently, asking him to share it with Greg or leave feedback. Instead of relegating Alex/Horne to a dialogue as character, commodity, or instigator, fans instead engage him in dialogue as peer and fellow fan. Fans perform a position of relatively equal agency in their attempts to create an ethical persona based on Horne's actions, attempting to reverse traditional fan-creator dynamics and going a step past participatory identity formation into a construction of themselves through Horne's pseudo-participation *in* fandom, their own relationship to reality, and all the complicated fannish emotions that arise from it all.

"Taskmaster broke me": Performing the ethical fan persona through moral exceptionalism

Fans also posit *Taskmaster* RPF as a kind of moral exception, either by relating it to squick or asserting its moral neutrality. In doing so, rather than constructing and performing their persona through the celebrity persona, fans do so through a performative removal of their own agency in the media environment, intentionally avoiding moralisation or suggesting that it has been momentarily taken away.

A squick is "something the [fanfiction] reader or author does not enjoy, with no expectation that others ought to share the disinclination" (Kustritz 2024, p. 73). Importantly, squick implies individual preference, not a general moral judgement (Kustritz 2024, p. 119).

Even though squick itself does not imply moralisation—its very definition asks for boundaries without the judgement—the term's genesis in BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism, and masochism) communities derives from an *opposition* to moralisation, rather than the mere lack of it. Proposed as an alternative to kink, a squick is defined within the BDSM context as an "emotional gut reaction to stimuli that one finds repulsive or disgusting… meant to point our attention to the visceral reaction, without implying a moral condemnation or judgement" (Ortmann and Sprott 2013, p. 155). In both of these contexts, there is a common understanding: communities who are oft-moralised by "outsiders" need ways to neutrally but strictly communicate boundaries, limits, or disgusts to avoid moralising themselves while protecting various comfort levels and interests. As such, squick in fandom is born of a necessity to communicate about taboo or touchy topics without falling victim to moralisation.

Within the *Taskmaster* fandom—and within RPF spaces more broadly—squick becomes a way of thinking about practices oft-moralised by out-members or that otherwise feel "bad" to in-members of the community. A common theme is for fans to allude to the idea that *Taskmaster* RPF "squicks them out", but that they want other fans to have free reign over their fannish experiences. Many fans express that RPF is a line they do not feel comfortable crossing, but that they would never try to ruin it for other fans or still want other fans to "have fun". Other fans evoke the idea of squick to establish *Taskmaster* as *not* a squick. For instance, one fan compliments the author of a popular *Taskmaster* fanfiction, commenting that they "can really imagine [Greg and Alex] saying and doing all of this, and at the same time it doesn't squick me out like RPF does most of the time? Incredible".

Both of these strains of discourse—establishing RPF as a squick and establishing specifically *Taskmaster* RPF as not a squick—allow (RPF) fans to curate their own fannish persona in a manner that they find ethical without imposing their moral standards onto others. For fans who find RPF to be squicky, there is an intentional lack of moralising RPF fans; for fans who find *Taskmaster* RPF to be *not* a squick, there is a perceived lack of need for moralisation, a sense of moral neutrality. As such, the ethical fan persona is wrapped up in a form of moral exceptionalism, through some form of resistance to the "need" for moralisation. I bring in the concept of squick not because it is unique to *Taskmaster* fandom, but because of how often fans will allude to this second strain of discourse, and the way it travels outside of the RPF side of the fandom. For instance, consider a widely-circulated reply to a Reddit post on r/taskmaster after Alex mentioned several fanfictions by name during series fifteen episode three:

> I didn't even realize Taskmaster fanfic would exist until Alex and then Greg started talking about it openly, and I'm now half convinced that some of Alex's stunts are done to egg fic writers on. The thigh-high boots? The dog bed? The declaration of love that Greg staunchly ignored? The man is kinky and encouraging his kinky fans to think of him in kinky ways. *I'm slightly squeamish about Real People Fanfiction, but Taskmaster fic is the most ethical RPF I can imagine* (emphasis mine).

This fan conceives of *Taskmaster* RPF as immune from squick ("I'm slightly squeamish… but Taskmaster fic is the most ethical RPF I can imagine") because of the exceptional actions of Alex/Horne (he "egg[s] fic writers on" and is "encouraging his kinky fans"). Similarly to how RPF fans discuss Alex/Horne within tags on the Archive, this fan places the onus on Horne. Instead of creating the ethical persona through a construction of Alex, however, they do so through squick, implying a lack of moral judgement/a status of moral exceptionalism. The *stated absence of squick* from a practice implies a sense of relative moral highness or being a "good", or, at least, not "bad" fan. It may not elevate *Taskmaster* RPF to an actual moral or perceived-as-moral

practice, or even remove it from moral discourse (this fan still discusses RPF in the realm of relative morality), but it makes this particular incarnation of the practice not *amoral*, shaping *Taskmaster* fannish identity into a not *unethical* persona.

Across the fandom, it is common to find comments and notes expressing similar attitudes. For instance, one fan on Tumblr emphasises that, previously, they did not understand why other fans enjoyed RPF, but watching *Taskmaster* makes them "get it now". Fans establish the moral exceptionalism of *Taskmaster* RPF because of the show's queer (weird) relationship to the genre. Another fan comments on a fanfiction that "the worst thing is—I strictly DON'T ship real people… Taskmaster broke me". These kinds of comments frame *Taskmaster* as an agentive exception to traditional preferences or practices in fandom, almost as if fans are being acted upon by the show or its presenters. Under this logic, fans are not doing anything that could be perceived as immoral. Instead, they are merely picking up what is being put down. As such, fans perform moral persona not in relation to what is "moral" (based on the celebrity persona), but what is *not amoral.* Fans may argue that *Taskmaster* RPF, as a moral exception, is ethical or acceptable, but, when they do, they position it in relation to other, "bad" RPF, creating a duelling unethical fan persona that they distance themselves from.

Conclusion

Following the release of outtakes where Alex mentioned several fanfictions, one of the fans whose work was mentioned took to Tumblr with self-proclaimed musings on RPF. In their post, they question and clarify what RPF is, explaining why and how they write it; for them, using the celebrity is a "shortcut" to finding other people and fans who might relate to the topics they write about. In their eyes, the point of RPF is to create a space where fellow fans and readers can see themselves in the story and feel "there is nothing wrong with you". The point of RPF, then, is to create a space where that relation is accepted for them as an author and fellow fans as readers.

RPF is not—and has never been—merely a site of celebrity construction or fannish confusion. It is a practice in *fannish* (un)ethical persona construction, of putting oneself and others in relation to what is felt and/or perceived as "wrong" in fannish and popular spheres. RPF has never just been about how the fan sees the celebrity; it is about how the fan sees *themself*. RPF fans may very well engage with the celebrity persona—but, as the fan quoted demonstrates, they do not stop there.

There is a need for a fan-centric exploration of persona in RPF scholarship; as I have argued in this article, fans construct themselves as (un)ethical via moral performance. Though my primary focus in this article is how fans construct and perform the *ethical* fan persona (and, thus, [in]directly establish and resist an unethical fannish "other"), future research in this area should explore how fans perform an *un*ethical fan persona in their own fannish practices. Regardless of the mechanism of performance, though, fans forge these personas with awareness of what is fannishly and popularly considered "wrong" or immoral. This moral performance is central to understanding RPF and fandom more broadly. As such, scholarship at the intersection of RPF and persona must move away from a prioritisation of the celebrity persona to explore the role of fannish moral performance in the practice.

End Notes

[i] I do not directly cite fanworks for ethical reasons, but this fan provides explicit consent for the reuse of their data on the condition that they are given attribution.

ii I use Greg and Alex to refer to *Taskmaster*/fandom personas, and Davies and Horne to refer to actions and personas outside of the *Taskmaster* context.

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