

**“WHY WOULD ANYONE WANT TO WATCH OUR  
LIVES?”: DEAN AS FANBOY AND THE  
METATEXTUAL MEDIATION OF FAN DESIRE IN  
*SUPERNATURAL***

During the 2012 “Salute to *Supernatural*” convention in Dallas, TX, actor Jensen Ackles (who plays Dean Winchester on the series) answered a fan’s light-hearted question by turning it back on her, asking her “What would *you* do for a Klondike bar?” Her response was immediate: “You.” Instead of responding verbally, Ackles shook his head, dropped his face into his hands, and left the stage for a moment, while the audience of roughly 1,000 people, mostly female, howled in laughter.

This particular incident illustrates an issue that is, while not unique to *Supernatural*, particularly pertinent to the series—a show in which, as Lynn Zubernis and Katherine Larsen note, “fan practices are incorporated into the show itself and canon and ‘fanon’ live side by side” (3). *Supernatural* has an exceptionally active fan base—one which the series often acknowledges by engaging in metatextual conversations with fans. With episode titles like “Slash Fiction” and episodes that involve brothers Sam (Jared Padalecki) and Dean Winchester meeting the “author” of their lives—a “prophet” who makes his living writing and selling the visions he has of the brothers’ adventures in monster hunting—the show’s writers overtly acknowledge fan-produced literature (like Sam/Dean “Wincest” slash fiction or less sexually charged spin-off novels). Zubernis and Larsen note that “much of the focus of fan studies has been on what happens when fans appropriate the role of producer, taking media properties and using them to create fan

fiction, fan art, and videos.” (143) However, in its “meta episode[s],” *Supernatural* “has nearly erased the fourth wall entirely.” (144) This erasure has been met with mixed responses from the fans themselves, ranging from delight to outright disgust at the way *Supernatural* deals with the issue of fandom.

Ultimately, the metatextual episodes in *Supernatural* serve as a means of mediating fan desire. In “Breaking the Mirror: Metafictional Strategies in *Supernatural*,” Alberto N. Garcia claims that the series “[blurs] the relationship between text and context for the audience.” This blurring invites the fan/viewer into the show but also serves to reassert authorial control over the metafictional universe in which the fans function. That is, by engaging with the fans in what is, effectively, the fans’ “playground” of imaginative fan-space, *Supernatural* asserts its own authority over that space. This reassertion of authorial power particularly appears in the episodes featuring the fangirl Becky Rosen (Emily Perkins), who is repeatedly shown rubbing her hands across Sam Winchester and otherwise displaying sexual desire for him in ways that are coded as inappropriate. In “Season Seven, Time for a Wedding,” Becky even uses demon magic to coerce Sam into marrying her—and the scene in which Sam annuls his marriage to Becky is indicative of the series’ disavowal of its own fans. By effectively “divorcing” the fans, that is, the series illustrates its desire to separate itself from fan desire, thereby working to mediate that desire.

Less overtly, however, the series also works to mediate fan desire through depictions of Dean connecting him to the image of the “fanboy”—that is, by turning Dean into a stereotypical fanboy in episodes such as “Changing Channels,” “Time After Time” and “Frontierland,” the series places Dean in the position of *Supernatural*’s own fans, suggesting a connection between the two. But repeatedly, Dean-as-fanboy fails to engage appropriately with the objects of his fannish desire, implying that fans’ imaginative engagement is at best inappropriate and at worst

laughable. Ultimately, while *Supernatural* may engage with its fans in a postmodern, metafictional universe, it does so in a way that serves to re-appropriate and re-situate fan-created products within that universe so that in the end, all fans of the show also become property of the show, making them complicit in their own disempowerment.

### **Dean as Fanboy in “Frontierland”**

Dean’s role as fanboy in Season 6’s “Frontierland” is one example of the series’ less overt depictions of its own fans. In this episode, the demon-hunting Winchester brothers go back in time to find the ashes of a phoenix, needed to kill Eve, “Mother of All”—the monstrous progenitress of vampires, dragons, shapeshifters, and other supernatural hybrids. In “Frontierland,” Dean is situated as a fanboy, engages in a little costume play, attempts to interact with the object of his fannish desire, and finally succeeds in participating effectively only when an authority figure grants him access, ultimately highlighting the need for authorial approval of fan activity.

The episode sets up Dean as a fanboy from the beginning, when he discovers a reference to killing a phoenix in Samuel Colt’s journal—from 5 March 1861. Having once already traveled in time to the 1970s, Dean comes up with the plan to retrieve the ashes from the one source they know about. He shares this plan with his brother and his demon-hunting mentor Bobby (Jim Beaver):

**Dean:** I know where we can find one. March 5, 1861. Sunrise, Wyoming. We’ll *Star Trek IV* this bitch.

(Sam shrugs)

**Bobby:** I only watched *Deep Space Nine*.

**Dean:** It's like I don't know you guys anymore. *Star Trek IV*. Save the whales.

(Bobby and Sam both shrug.)

**Dean:** We hop back in time, hop back in time, we join up with Samuel Colt, we hunt the phoenix, and then we haul the ashes back home with us.

Though pop culture references abound in *Supernatural*, this reference to *Star Trek*—the source of perhaps the most famous fan communities—is also inherently a reference to fandom itself. The other characters' failure to recognize the reference further reinforces Dean's position as a fanboy—he has fannish knowledge that the others do not; he has participated in “active consumption of information about [the] fanned object.” (Zubernis and Larsen 16) Dean continues to display his inner fanboy as he and Sam prepare to travel back to the Old West by shopping for what he considers appropriate clothing. When Sam accuses Dean of being “obsessed with all that Wild West stuff” and having “a fetish,” he reinforces the equation of fanboys and literal fanatics, echoing Paul Lopes' claim that fanboys “are viewed as suffering from arrested development.” That Dean can, according to Sam, “recite every Clint Eastwood movie ever made,” including (and perhaps even especially) “the monkey movies,” further indicates the “significant amount of time and effort” that Zubernis and Larsen identify as fan markers. Moreover, Sam's disdain places Dean in the stereotypical category that Paul Booth identifies as “people with unhealthy attachments to media texts.” (175)

Initially, it seems as though the trip back to the past becomes, for Dean, a trip that resembles what Roger C. Aden considers a fan “pilgrimage”—the kind of fannish visit that Matt Hills suggests offers fans opportunities to reinterpret texts and gain access to extratextual

pleasures. But Dean's attempts to interact with the object of his fannish devotion—the Old West itself—illustrate the continuing problem of mediating fannish desire. First, his attempts at effective cosplay (“costume play”) fail; he is repeatedly ridiculed for his effort to both display and experience “authenticity.” Even before the brothers leave Bobby's house, the angel Castiel (Misha Collins) asks about Dean's serape “Is it customary to wear a blanket?” Once Dean arrives in Montana, he is told that he has a “nice blanket,” that his shirt is “very clean” and that he needs “real gear.”

Dean's attempts to become part of the world he idolizes also call his masculinity into question. As Zubernis and Larsen note, “male media fans fear being perceived as not sexual enough.” (59) In this episode, Dean's attempts to “dress the part” cause his masculinity—or at least his heterosexuality—to be called into question. At the sheriff's office, Sam says “We're looking for a man” and the sheriff (Dean Wray), looking over the clothes Dean chose for the brothers, says “I'll bet.” In the saloon, Dean chokes on the whiskey he's served. And Darla (April Telek), the clearly diseased saloon girl who tries to kiss him, is, he says, “so much more germier than I pictured.” Nothing is as he imagined it. Even his greeting of “howdy, pilgrim” is met with “I ain't no pilgrim!”

All of these events are played for laughs, but they nonetheless highlight potential problems with fan behavior based on inappropriate notions of the fanned object. Dean cannot distinguish between reality and his fannish appropriation of that reality as mediated through movies, so he repeatedly missteps in his interactions with others, illustrating what Lopes identifies as “the basic fanboy's social identity [as] discredited” due to “poor interpersonal skills” and “lack of intelligence.” The fanboy's interests are often depicted as juvenile; so are Dean's, a fact that is highlighted by Sam's look of disdain when Dean jokes that he will “stay

here, hook up with the posse. 'Cause you know me—I'm a posse magnet. I mean, I love posse. Make that into a t-shirt." Sam says, "You done?" and outlines a more realistic plan.

Indeed, by comparison to Dean, Sam, who approaches the trip to 1861 with relatively few preconceived notions, is more effective overall. When Sam gets to Samuel Colt's cabin, he is able to retrieve the special demon-killing gun because he is simply himself; he tells Colt (Sam Hennings) that he is from the future, shows Colt his cell phone, and demonstrates his familiarity with demon hunting in general. Rather than aiming for period authenticity, he deals with the situation on its—and his—own terms.

The closest that Dean comes to his idealized vision of the Old West is a shootout with the phoenix, Elias Finch (Matthew John Armstrong). In a stereotypical street fight, Dean wins a quick-draw competition and uses Colt's gun (retrieved by Sam) to shoot the phoenix, who disintegrates into a pile of ashes. However, this moment of success is quickly overshadowed by the fact that Dean misses his narrow window of opportunity to gather the ashes of the Phoenix to take back to his own time—in fact, he misses that chance because he is caught up in the moment, savoring his defeat of his opponent and the opportunity, finally, to live out his fantasy of the Old West.

Sam and Dean are pulled back into their own time without the phoenix ashes, having ultimately failed in their quest. But the episode ends, predictably enough, with the delivery of the ashes by the modern-day version of the Pony Express, Samuel Colt having packaged them and arranged for their delivery, along with the cell phone Sam accidentally left behind. Although this scene, too, asks the audience to identify with stereotypical tropes, it also underscores the series' tendency to restore power to sites of authority. Henry Jenkins has called fan use of media properties "textual poaching," a term that a number of critics have argued perpetuates the idea of

the validity of authorial control over the characters and worlds so often appropriated by fans. “Frontierland” ultimately seems to support textual legitimacy as arising from the original author. Dean’s attempts to participate in his Old West fantasy might be a typically masculine form of fan play, whose “originality . . . lies not so much in the ways that it transforms the canon, but rather through the ways in which enriches it,” as John Walliss writes. But the fact that those transformations are repeatedly rebuffed illustrates a basic rejection of attempts to assert fan control over canon.

Catherine Coker writes that “At the most basic level, the dialogue between creator-authors and fan-authors is primarily a discussion of control—a control of characters, a control of worlds, a control of money” (91). In her discussion of “The Monster at the End of This Book” (4.18), Laura Felschow writes that the episode “reinforces the power of the writers and reminds cult fans that they may only receive what is offered.” By forcing Dean to rely upon Samuel Colt for the ashes, “Frontierland” suggests that the control of the text belongs not to Dean, the fan, but to the authors of that text—in this case, the members of the Old West society Dean attempted to emulate. In its connection to amusement parks, the title of the episode “Frontierland” might imply that for Dean, the Wild West becomes a place for what Hills calls “affective play,” but ultimately, while the fans may play there, *Supernatural* leaves little room for fans to exert their own authority.

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