



Poaching Reality

The Reality Fictions of Online *Survivor* Fans: A Case Study

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Virtual Communities: Theories and Practices
Feb. 7, 2004

Note: The author would like to thank Mario Lanza, Peter Harkey, Gabriel Cade, Helen Glover, and Tanya Vance for their assistance with this project, as well as the members of the SurvivorSucks virtual community who answered his survey questions.

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Introduction

On Aug. 11, 2003, Tanya Vance, a 27-year-old social worker from Kingsport, Tenn., was declared the million-dollar winner of *All-Star Survivor: Greece* on live national television. She had outlasted 15 competitors through 39 days of starvation, intense physical challenges, and psychological machinations – all on a set of islands in the Aegean Sea.

“Oh, you guys are too sweet!” she said with tears in her eyes after the show’s host, Jeff Probst, announced her victory. “I’m feeling so great right now,” she went on moments later, brushing her hair out of her face. “This is unbelievable. *Totally* unbelievable. It’s better than, like, my wildest dreams.”¹

Wildest dreams, indeed: None of this ever happened. Tanya Vance never won *Survivor*. Tanya Vance was actually the second person to be kicked out of *Survivor: Thailand*, which aired on CBS in fall 2002. She lasted six out of a possible 39 days.

Her victory was the creation of Mario Lanza, a *Survivor* fan who has written or co-written three “All-Star” editions of the show in novel form² and posted them on the Web site www.Survivor-Central.com. This is a form of fan fiction, which is “original, unauthorized fiction by fans of a show, movie, books or video game. The fiction involves characters and the location of the show from which the person is a fan.” (Hale, 2002) Fan fiction can also involve celebrities. The *Survivor* fan fiction appears to be a combination of the two: Fiction based on a television show that involves real people (or, as we shall see, representations of real people). Lanza selects 16 “characters” from previous editions of *Survivor*, puts them in a remote setting, and sends them through the motions of a new

¹ See http://www.survivor-central.com/columns/article.php?columns_id=1197.

game. He posts one “episode” every five days or so, and online fans react to each much as they do the show itself – speculating as to who will be voted out next or who will win.

Lanza is far from alone in writing *Survivor* fiction. Various other material can be found online, much of it unfinished. Some, like Lanza’s, involves “All-Star” scenarios. Some involves other celebrities or “regular people.” And some is intertextual, involving characters from works such as the *Harry Potter* series. However, examining all of these would be beyond this scope of this paper. As it appears that Lanza’s is easily the most prominent *Survivor* fan fiction, this paper will focus solely on his work as a case study.

How does Lanza approach writing these texts, along with his co-authors? How does he appropriate the primary text – the TV show? How have *Survivor* cast members and online *Survivor* fans reacted to and consumed his work, and what does this say about the *Survivor* fan virtual community? This paper will explore these questions -- using Henry Jenkins III’s *Textual Poachers* as its analytical base -- by examining Lanza’s work, statements he has made about that work, and online interviews/surveys of Lanza, his readers, and former *Survivor* contestants who have been re-created in his novels.

***Survivor* and the Formation of an Online Fan Community**

Survivor debuted in May 2000, and completed its seventh incarnation in December 2003³. The show deposits 16 Americans in a remote locale, where they form

² Lanza prefers not to call his works novels, seeing them as “experiment(s) in psychology and role playing,” according to an e-mail interview. For simplicity they will be referred to as novels here, however.

³ The seven seasons: *Survivor*, summer 2000 (now sometimes referred to as *Survivor: Borneo*); *Survivor: The Australian Outback*, spring 2001; *Survivor: Africa*, fall 2001; *Survivor: Marquesas*, spring 2002; *Survivor: Thailand*, fall 2002; *Survivor: The Amazon*, spring 2003; and *Survivor: Pearl Islands (Panama)*, fall 2003. *Survivor: All-Stars* is airing as of this writing.

two “tribes” -- a pair of mini-societies⁴. Cameramen film contestants’ every move as they interact with their environment and one another. Producers also interview them for “confessional” soliloquies. The contestants are given basic supplies but generally must find their own food, water and shelter. They also take part in physical and/or mental competitions run by host Probst, to win rewards or “immunity.” Every three days, one of the two tribes (or, later, as one larger combined tribe) votes one member out of the game during an elaborate ceremony called Tribal Council, with immunity winners safe from the vote. As their numbers winnow, the tribe (or voting alliance) with the most members generally takes control. By the 39th day, only two contestants remain, and seven previously dispatched contestants return to select the winner, who receives \$1 million.

The show quickly became a big hit and developed almost out of nowhere a large online fan base. Early on, the main site was SurvivorSucks.com⁵. It made national headlines when its Webmasters accurately predicted who would be voted out several weeks running⁶. National press coverage increased after one online fan found a CBS Web site glitch that seemed to indicate a contestant named Gervase would win. All this publicity helped the show’s ratings (in addition to its suspenseful nature) – by August 2000, *Survivor* had made the covers of both *Time* and *Newsweek*, and more than 50 million viewers tuned in for the finale, a figure virtually unheard of for episodic television. The Gervase controversy, other incidents and ultimately the question of “Who

⁴ *Survivor: All-Stars*, the first non-fictional edition featuring former castaways for another go-round, features three tribes of six, for a total of 18 players. This breaks from tradition.

⁵ The original site became defunct in early 2001, but the array of message boards it spawned still thrives at <http://pub207.ezboard.com/bsurvivorsucks>.

⁶ This was thanks to a brief video clip that *Survivor* executive producer Mark Burnett had placed in the show’s opening montage – it showed a Tribal Council with only nine contestants, who, as the Webmasters and others accurately assumed, turned out to be the final nine remaining. Burnett later tricked many online fans by planting doctored footage of only four players at a Tribal Council in a later opening sequence.

will be the sole Survivor?” spurred intense online activity as well, as “spoiling” the show in advance became a pastime for many fans:

Most *Survivor* viewers are content to let the show go each week, once they see the preview of the upcoming episode. But for true *Survivor* addicts, the preview signals the beginning of another week of mind-bending analysis as they try to predict the next contestant to get “booted.” They freeze their videotapes and mull over scenes that may or may not provide clues. They scour the Internet for news and gossip. And they eagerly share their predictions -- along with some deliberately misleading spoilers -- on Web sites created for the sole purpose of debating who will ultimately win *Survivor*.⁷

From Feb. 14, 2001 through the end of that year, SurvivorSucks received nearly 14 million visits and close to 472,000 posts (Wright 2002). Numerous other Web sites flourished as well, many of which still exist today (including Survivor-Central); some users post at mainly just one site, while others flit from place to place. There are also news sites devoted to *Survivor*⁸, which remains a top five hit in the Nielsen ratings. These forces have combined to create virtual community – that which Howard Rheingold described as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.” (1998) For a more technical definition, we turn to *U.S. News and World Report*: “A meeting place for people on the Internet. Designed to facilitate interaction and collaboration among people who share common interests and needs. Online communities can be open to all or by membership only and may or may not offer moderator tools.”

For *Survivor* fans, this “common interest” was an intense love of the show and a desire to spoil, spoil, spoil – sort of a constant duel between fans and executive producer Mark Burnett. As seasons of the show piled up, fans fantasized about an alumni edition

⁷ For a brief semi-history of the spoiler boards, see the author’s “Spoiler Sports,” available at <http://www.poppolitics.com/articles/2002-01-10-spoilers.shtml> and from which this quote was taken. See

featuring players from prior seasons, especially as former cast members themselves began popping in to the community or writing columns⁹. This opened the door for the creation, and welcoming, of *Survivor* All-Star fan fiction.

Fan Fiction as “Textual Poaching”

Fan fiction is perhaps most closely associated with *Star Trek* – with mimeographed copies of fan-written “episodes” or novels circulating for years¹⁰ -- and fans of that show have been derided as social misfits, emotionally and intellectually immature, unable to separate reality from fantasy, and willing to spend scads of money on worthless trinkets while “cultivating worthless knowledge” (Jenkins 1992, 10). Even *Star Trek*’s own William Shatner has mocked these “Trekkies” (or as they prefer, Trekkers), telling them to “get a life!” in one *Saturday Night Live* sketch. They have been further mocked in *Newsweek*, the documentary *Trekkies* and the film *Galaxy Quest*.

However, in his landmark book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), Henry Jenkins III rejects these notions as stereotyped social constructions, using Michel de Certeau’s writings as his primary theoretical base.

[Fans are] active producers and manipulators of meanings...who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory experience.... Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and influencing mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media. (23)

also “Spoiled Rotten?”, available at <http://www.poppolitics.com/articles/2003-03-26-spoiledrotten.shtml>. Additionally, Henry Jenkins III has a more in-depth forthcoming analysis of *Survivor* spoiling.

⁸ See www.survivornews.net and www.survivorfever.net.

⁹ See www.survivor-central.com for a list of *Survivor* alums-turned-columnists; others have posted in the past on SurvivorSucks and answered fan questions. See <http://pub207.ezboard.com/fsurvivorsucksfrm17.showMessageRange?topicID=3316.topic&start=1&stop=20>.

¹⁰ There is much disagreement on when fan fiction “began,” with some dating it to centuries ago, others seeing it beginning as copyright laws took effect, and still others pointing to *Star Trek* texts or the debut of “fan zines.” See Hale’s work at <http://www.dailyunctilo.com/history/theories001.html> and <http://www.dailyunctilo.com/history/theories000.html>.

Fans, then, turn the act of watching TV from passive to active, and one route to this is via fan fiction. Other genres of it exist also, involving characters from film and videogames – and also celebrities, such as “boy band” members. “There are stories of band member conflicts, chance meetings with fans, songwriting meetings, family relationships of the bands, record biz goings-on and much more.” (Pahati 2002) Such writings – especially when they involve sexual entanglements¹¹ – raise complex ethical issues, not the least of which involves the difference between appropriating merely copyrighted characters and becoming a ventriloquist for the fictionalized famous.

The rise of the Internet has facilitated the spread of fan fiction, with sites such as FanFiction.net popping up. Taking part in fan fiction is far easier now than 20 years ago, when one needed to photocopy and mail fan zines to the masses. Just as anyone can be a journalist in the age of the Internet, so can anyone be a fan fiction writer.

Rewriting *Survivor*: Settings and Twists

In an e-mail interview, Lanza stated explicitly why he started his first fanfic, set in Hawaii. “I was bored between seasons,” he said. “After *Marquesas* ended [in May 2002] I had no *Survivor* fix.... It started as a role-playing experiment, to see if I could role-play 16 people. I wanted to try something interesting that no one had done before.”

After *Hawaii* was a hit, he and his co-authors¹² had another motivation: please their burgeoning fan base. For *Alaska*, “I wanted to fix some of *Hawaii*’s mistakes and give the fans more of what they wanted. So at this point I did it for the fans (and the glory of course). If they read it, I will write it.”

¹¹ Sex-centered writings involving two men or male characters, such as Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock of *Star Trek*, is known as “slash” fan fiction.

All this is easier said than done -- creating a totally false version of *Survivor* is no simple task. Authenticity is key, in terms of accurate depictions of the physical setting – lakes, beaches, plants, wildlife – believable challenges and twists, and most of all, accurate characterizations of the participants, most of whom both the authors and readers have come to know and love (or in some cases, love to hate).

Survivor types have called the location of each season “the 17th contestant,” so Lanza must make the setting a believable choice – and include many details, which requires research. For the second novel, Lanza had considered using New Zealand.

[But] I realized New Zealand wouldn't work that well. There isn't a whole lot of wildlife to hunt, and I don't know the culture well enough without requiring some hardcore research. ...I persuaded everyone to use Alaska.... It was easy... grew up in Seattle, and I know that Alaska is a lot like the Washington forests during the summer, so I could basically just write about what I knew. But the minimal research was the biggest factor. Plus I had a deep desire to help educate people that Alaska is *NOT* an ice and snow hellhole all year.¹³

Lanza parlayed this into an online promo for the “series” – one that read much like the video promos that Jeff Probst presents at the end of most *Survivor* seasons, teasing fans for the next installment. It featured lush photos and descriptions: Alaska “is a much different place than most imagine. In the summers, the land is ruled by caribou, wolverines, mosquitoes, and the king of the Alaskan wilderness, the grizzly bear. It also contains some of the most spectacular vistas and views found in nature.”¹⁴ Here, then, is an effort at authenticity, in terms of the location and how it is presented to “viewers.”

Furthermore, though this may not have been Lanza's primary intent, the Alaskan location fulfilled fans' hopes to see a “cold weather” edition of the show¹⁵, even if it wasn't real. *Survivor*'s producers have hesitated to film in a place where contestants

¹² Lanza had assistance for *Alaska* and *Hawaii*, but was the main editor and writer, and wrote *Greece* alone.

¹³ See http://www.survivor-central.com/columns/article.php?columns_id=872.

¹⁴ See <http://members.aol.com/AllStarHawaii/akpreview.htm>.

could not wear bikinis and the like, for fear of a ratings dive. Filming within the United States, too, might also threaten secrecy. So the novel's setting allowed fans to have their cake and eat it too, satisfying them in a way that the real show could not. This isn't something that the casual viewer might think about, but true fans – those who, according to Jenkins, translate their viewing into some kind of cultural activity – “focus on details that are excessive or peripheral to the primary plots but gain significance within the fans' own conceptions of the series.... Fan stories...respond to the oft-voiced desires of the fan community.” (Jenkins 1992, 155)

Lanza and company also have displayed an uncanny feel for what producers might pull themselves. The fictional *Survivor: Alaska* featured tribes split by gender – and soon after it debuted, CBS announced that the then-upcoming *Survivor: Amazon* would do the same (*Amazon* had begun filming before Lanza announced this move, so it's not possible that CBS “copied” him). Then, as Lanza was writing (but had not yet posted) his *Greece* novel, which featured each tribe stranded on its own island, CBS announced that the next fall's *Survivor: Pearl Islands* would do the same.

Rewriting *Survivor*: Characters and the “Real”

The biggest challenge for Lanza is rewriting the characters. These are real people, not fictional creations, and so writing them “wrongly” can have consequences greater than angry e-mails from fans. There are several complicating factors here, not the least of which is the question of the “real.” For *Survivor*, despite being “reality TV,” is contrived.

¹⁵ Many old message board postings have been lost in the ether, but the author recalls arguments for a cold-weather *Survivor* being presented on several occasions.

As many have said, the notion of “reality TV” is ironic on its very surface. The phrase connotes truth, everyday experience, and perhaps most importantly, a lack of mediation – that what you see on video is as it happened. So it is with reality TV, which obscures or makes us “forget” cameras, time compression, editing, contrivances, packaging, sound and lighting instruments. And so it is with *Survivor*. Consider that each 44-minute episode is culled from 72 hours of footage from multiple cameras. Burnett only has to show what he wants to. He can make anyone look bad. He can make anyone look good.

Furthermore, as each season premieres, 20 million viewers meet 16 strangers for the first time. Intricate details and observations about these “characters” cannot be known all at once – instead, first impressions will be made, and the characters will be associated with certain details, and with them, stereotypes. These stereotypes often perpetuate into later episodes. Several black male contestants have been portrayed as lazy, with camera shots showing them laying down to rest during an intense physical challenge, sitting on the ground while their tribemates do all the work, etc. They later complained that their on-screen personas was not the “real” them. Another black male was engulfed in controversy when he was accused of stealing food. Women, gays, those from rural areas, military members, and others are also often portrayed stereotypically. Burnett also lavishes attention on characters he knows audiences will latch on to. The jolly Rupert was a central fixture of the recent *Survivor: Pearl Islands*, and following the show, castmate Shawn complained that the good things he had done had been left on the cutting-room floor, while the bad things Rupert had done had been edited out as well.¹⁶ The result:

¹⁶ Shawn aired his grievances on the “reunion” show that aired on CBS at 10 p.m. EST Dec. 14, 2003.

Rupert as protagonist, Shawn as antagonist. In *Africa*, the heavily tattooed Lex was painted as the bad guy by editors, despite being liked by his competitors (Wright 2001).

All this complicates the picture for those appropriating *Survivor* contestants for fan fiction. What is the “real” version of such persons? Should that be the version portrayed, or the version viewers saw on the original show? Is it even possible to objectively portray a contestant accurately, to precisely guess which contestants from other seasons someone would befriend, distrust, or vote out? What about characters who were voted out almost immediately – how can they be properly represented?

Lanza and his co-authors recognized this challenge from the get-go. “We spent a great deal of time planning out *how* they would play, *who* they would get along with, and *what* might happen,” he wrote in a guide to *Survivor: Alaska*. “It’s as much role-playing as it is writing, trying to get into the players’ heads, from what we know about them so far, and trying to play as if we were them. It’s also a bit like police profiling, where you try to predict a character’s actions based on what you know about them.”¹⁷

For the first two novels, Lanza and company relied mainly on contestants who had advanced at least seven episodes into their respective seasons (with a few exceptions, each edition of *Survivor* consists of 12 hour-long episodes and then a two-hour finale¹⁸) -- 29 out of 32 players had lasted that long, and the other three had lasted at least five episodes each. Therefore, these were generally players who both writers and eventual readers had come to know well and have strong feelings about, in one direction or

¹⁷ See <http://members.aol.com/AllStarHawaii/akfaq.htm>.

¹⁸ Normally, one player is voted out at the end of each episode, except for each season finale, which begins with four players who are whittled to one. There have been exceptions. *Australian Outback* had 14 episodes, with the final one starting with three players; *Amazon* and *Pearl Islands* began with a 90-minute first episode; finally, one episode in *Australia* ended with an injured player leaving the game, and *Pearl Islands* featured a two-part, two-hour episode that featured two players being voted out and a third quitting.

another (although each season, it seems one or two long-lasting players remain cardboard cutouts¹⁹). This is reflected by an unscientific survey of more than 5,000 people that the Web site SurvivorFever.net ran in advance of the spring 2004 real-life *Survivor: All-Stars*. In it, visitors voted for one man (out of eight) and one woman (out of eight) from each season that they would most like to see play again.²⁰ The 16 people poached to “play” *Survivor: Hawaii* had been chosen by an average of 21.8 percent of poll respondents; for *Alaska*, that figure was 20.2.²¹

“I just picked popular characters who were fun, good players, and would be fun to write for,” Lanza told me -- but he also had specific objectives for certain individuals:

There were three characters I really wanted to work on in *Alaska*. I didn't want them to turn into stereotypes, and I felt they would all be important. The first was Jerri²². There was no *WAY* I wanted her to turn into evil uber-bitch. I felt she probably wouldn't be around too long, and wanted her boot to be sympathetic, so it was my goal from day one to make you feel bad when she went.

The second character I wanted to work on was Greg²³. He was going to be *BY FAR* the most challenging to write, simply because he comes off almost as borderline insane. So I absolutely needed to study [*Borneo*] again before I started to write him. I felt he would be important, although I didn't see him as a potential villain until later.

And the third pet project of mine was going to be Silas²⁴. . . . I always had a soft spot for the guy. I like him, and so many people felt he didn't belong in *All-Stars*, so I thought it was a good idea to build him up, and make him likeable or (at the very least) entertaining. I wanted people to like him, and avoid the stereotype trap with him as well.²⁵

This dovetails nicely with Jenkins' quote from one *Star Trek* aficionado, who explained that fans “ ‘treat the program like Silly Putty,’ stretching its boundaries to

¹⁹ See Amber, *Australian Outback*; Zoe, *Marquesas*; Butch, *Amazon*; and Darrah, *Pearl Islands*.

²⁰ See http://www.survivorfever.net/polls_all_stars.html.

²¹ The figure for the real-life *All-Stars* show is 24.3 percent, showing the producers know what they are doing – especially since at least one person, Elizabeth Filarski Hasselbeck of *Australian Outback*, turned down an invitation. Elizabeth's rating: 41.7 percent.

²² For Jerri's official profile, see http://www.cbs.com/primetime/survivor2/survivors/jerri_b.html. She finished eighth in *Australia*, and was portrayed as that season's villain – conniving, selfish and sneaky.

²³ For Greg's official profile, see <http://www.cbs.com/primetime/survivor/survivors/greg.shtml>. He finished ninth on the original *Survivor*, and was best known for his “wacky” eccentricities (e.g. his “coconut phone”) and his alleged (and apparently untrue) affair with contestant Colleen.

²⁴ For Silas' official profile, see <http://www.cbs.com/primetime/survivor3/survivors/bios/silas.shtml>. He finished 12th on *Africa*, and was portrayed as a cocky, semi-dumb jock.

²⁵ See http://www.survivor-central.com/columns/article.php?columns_id=887.

incorporate their concerns, remolding its characters to better suit their desires.” (1992, 156) If a Lanza thinks a contestant was edited unfairly on TV, he can rectify that (though the writers remain semi-objective, randomly determining who wins challenges).

If much thought went into “casting,” even more went into the machinations that went down among the players. If one thing makes *Survivor* fans giddy, it’s the thought of favorite players going against one another, and Lanza et. al. considered carefully how things might play out. “One of the first things you need to do at the start is come up with some relationships. Who would be the obvious choices to get along, or not get along? Those relationships have to drive the story at the start, because you don’t have any other storyline yet. So we came up with a few obvious ones.” Lanza is also wise not to forget the past. “There was one more *very* important [plot point] that came later, and that was that Tammy still holds a grudge against Neleh. That was key, and I didn’t even see it until we were deciding on the final vote. Tammy could bully them all into voting for Neleh.”²⁶

He also insists that he overcomes any biases CBS’ selective editing tries to instill in fans. “When I watch the show, I watch the people, not the editing,” he wrote in his e-mail interview. “For example, Lex was never the bad guy in *Africa*. You could see that in a second if you looked through the editing. I didn’t base any of my decisions on TV portrayals. In fact I try to go opposite to TV portrayals if I [can]. I love to flesh out my characters more than they are on TV.” But it is still difficult. “I try very hard *not* to write people as stereotypes. So the people who *were* stereotypes on the show are harder.”

Lanza also worried about being stuck with the same plot element that many consider *Survivor*’s main weakness: The potential for one group (or alliance) of players –

usually from the same original tribe -- to gain a majority and then systematically vote out the others, resulting in boring predictability. In online *Survivor* parlance, this is called a Pagonging.²⁷ (And indeed, the development of a “fan vocabulary” is also symptomatic of community.) “One of the problems with these stories is the threat of a Pagonging,” he wrote. “If a Pagonging is boring to read, it is even *WORSE* to write. I mean, why write something that is predictable? So as a writer, you are always looking for a way to get yourself out of a corner. If there is some realistic way you can mix the game up, *DO IT*.” The producers of *Survivor* have no control over whether a Pagonging occurs, but this still jives with Jenkins’ take: “Individual episodes are evaluated against an idealized conception of the series, according to their conformity with the hopes and expectations the reader has for the series’ potential development.” (1992, 97) One way to “rebel” against a boring real-life Pagonging is to write a fictional *Survivor* where none occurs.

As discussed, the first two “novels” dealt with popular past players, but the third work, *Greece*, tackled less-known contestants. Subtitled *Second Chances*, the novel featured those kicked out first on each real-life *Survivor*, and others who had also failed to last long. This presented Lanza with both challenges and opportunities.

On the one hand, most of the 16 were neither well-known nor well-liked by fans. Their average score on the aforementioned SurvivorFever survey was only 5.7 percent, compared to more than 20 percent for those in the prior two novels. “*Greece* felt harder for me to get into just [because] these were players voted off near the beginning,” wrote a

²⁶ See http://www.survivor-central.com/columns/article.php?columns_id=887. On *Survivor: Marquesas*, a power shift occurred with nine players remaining. Four players, including Tammy, had a secret alliance to vote out everyone else; the other five, led by Neleh, realized this, united, and voted out those four players.

²⁷ So named for the events of the first season, in which members of the Tagi tribe voted out all five members of the naïve Pagong tribe one by one, once the tribes merged. Producers had to create misleading promos and insert out-of-sequence conversations into the program in order to hide this and keep their audience from growing bored.

fan known online as TedHighway, in reply to a questionnaire about Lanza's fan fiction that this writer posted to SurvivorSucks. "I really didn't have a favorite right off the bat."

A *Survivor* fan himself, Lanza also generally didn't know these people as well:

I wanted to tackle characters nobody really knew. It was partly to challenge myself but also partly a repayment to some of them. You see, I had always felt bad that certain people were on *Survivor*, but were never remembered. I just felt bad.... They deserved their own story too.... It was much harder, obviously, to approach this story. We only saw a few hours of most of these people, so a lot of it was flying blind. I had to either rewatch interviews, read Web sites, rewatch episodes, or... in a gamble that later paid off... rely on Survivors to help me." (E-mail interview)

This novel use of *Survivor* contestants to create their own representation will be discussed next. But fans' unfamiliarity with these people allowed Lanza more leeway in his writing. "Yes, [this] also gave me more latitude to do what I wanted," he told me.

"This type of story was a writer's dream. No one could criticize my characterizations!"

This is especially true because, as fans knew little about those who had been voted out early, there was no real "meta-text" for Lanza to contend with. Meta-text is Jenkins' term for fans' ideal (or simply acceptable) vision of a character or series. Fans arrive at this via "a composite view of many different episodes and [use] that meta-text to comprehend and evaluate the characters' conduct in particular narrative situations. Any new information the series provides about [a character] will be fit into this existing grid of assumptions," so long as the data conforms to that which has come before – if it has not, series producers may expect angry letters. Within fandom, the meta-text is institutionalized. "Elaborations become part of the program tradition, gain broad circulation and assume the status of accepted 'facts' seen as binding" on both fans and producers. (1992, 101) It's safe to say that the Internet has sped the creation of agreeable meta-texts for a series.

The relative lack of a meta-text for *most* short-lived contestants enabled Lanza to take liberties when he needed to, such as when unable to get a handle on characters.

These were his thoughts on constructing two of *Greece's* players:

- Ryan Aiken (voted out in Episode 1 of *The Amazon*): “He is charming and tries to be suave, but [has] serial-killer eyes. That’s just an observation I made from TV (and from studying deviant psychology in real life). I wanted to make him as dangerous and chilling as possible. He was going to be my villain.”
- Tanya Vance (see Page 2): “Tanya was a tough one to write. She is very underwritten at the start because I didn't know her at all. I made her sweet, nice and under-the-radar. But I had heard from a few sources that she has a cutthroat side too...she really grew on me and by the time I met Tanya (around episode 9) I thought I had a good handle on her. She is the sweetheart with a dagger.”

Rewriting *Survivor*: Self-Portraits

In what must be a surreal experience, 48 former *Survivors* have found themselves re-written in Lanza’s Internet stories. Although writers appropriating other shows have been subject to cease-and-desist orders, and some Web sites disallow fiction about celebrities for fear of lawsuits, Lanza reports only positive responses to his work – in fact, some contestants have even assisted him.

Though Lanza had been in touch with several *Survivors* in the past, thanks in part to a column he also writes for *Survivor-Central*, they were the most help for *Greece*. After he randomly picked Diane Ogden (16th place, *Africa*) and Gabriel Cade (12th place, *Marquesas*) as “tribe captains” for his story, he contacted them and had them draft their

own teammates live on the phone. This gave the story “extra authenticity,” he told me. “I got very lucky and happened to draw the names of two very accessible Survivors.”

Lanza actually already knew Cade, and had promised him a spot in a future story, so the former contestant was eager to help. “I put in a lot of time at the start trying to explain Gabe and who he is,” Lanza said. “We talked a good deal about how he would play a second time around and how he could justify what needed to be done. Almost all the dialogue and stuff [his character said] in the first few episodes was written by Gabe himself. That is word for word from his mouth.”

In a separate e-mail interview, Cade echoed those comments. “Mario presented an accurate portrayal, especially since I was able to interact with Mario so much as the writing went on. Most of my characterization is from direct conversations he and I had.”

This illustrates how this hybrid of celebrity and TV fan fiction can take shape not just via fans’ feelings, but by participants’ own opinions of themselves. This mitigates mischaracterizations Lanza may have unwittingly absorbed from selective, “unreal” editing on the TV show – however, if Survivors create their own self-representations, do those necessarily constitute an accurate, “objective” portrayal? Few, after all, would paint themselves as villains.

Cade, Ogden and others helped with additional characters and other technical details. “I wanted some of *them* to tell me what these people were like in real life,” he wrote. “I knew Teresa Cooper quite well and I contacted her. She helped a lot. And I knew Rob Cesternino a bit. He helped me with” Ryan Aiken’s character (see Page 15).²⁸

²⁸ Cooper was fifth on *Africa*, while Cesternino, a fan favorite for his unending strategizing and manipulating, was third on *Amazon*, with many calling him the best *Survivor* player not to win.

Of the at least 15 Survivors who have read his stories²⁹, Lanza lists Cesternino as perhaps his biggest fan. “He not only reads them, he asked me to send him copies to read at home. Rob is a junkie of the show just like me.”

I spoke by phone with Peter Harkey, who was 16th on *Marquesas* but finished third in the fictional *Greece* edition. Lanza called him “by far the hardest of the players to write. I was very, very nervous about trying him...Gabe helped me a lot with Peter in the story. I don’t think it would have worked without Gabe's help.”

Gabe, a friend of Peter’s, turned him on to Lanza’s story. “He told me, ‘This is hysterical, you gotta read it,’” said Harkey, of Millis, Mass. He eventually contacted Lanza, who actually had Peter write up his own “final speech” and other dialogue in case his fictional representation reached the final two.

Peter was impressed overall. “The character online was pretty accurate,” he told me. “My wife almost thought some of the things were actually happening. It’s fiction but it also is taking real people.... He was creating it, but it wasn’t from left field.”

Helen Glover, who placed fourth on the real-life *Survivor: Thailand* and won the fictional *Survivor: Alaska*, concurred. “He seemed to capture my personality very well, which was amazing, seeing as how he had no personal interaction with me,” she told me in an e-mail interview, though she noted her fictional representation used more profanity and spoke in a more “coarse” way than she does in real life.

Other former *Survivor* contestants have found Lanza’s depictions of them to be *more* accurate than those that aired on CBS (of course, this again raises the question of whether a person can objectively evaluate depictions of themselves). Cade called both characterizations of him “pretty good” but told me that because Lanza’s “episodes” were

²⁹ This is Lanza’s low-ball estimate, from an instant message chat, December 2003.

not as dependent on stereotypes as CBS', and because of their conversations during the creative process, Lanza "hit a little closer to home."

Tanya Vance -- who, as noted earlier, was 15th on *Survivor: Thailand* but won the fictional *Survivor: Greece* -- took it a step further. "Mario's depiction of me was more accurate than CBS's because he showed some of my personality," she told me. "CBS only showed me vomiting. I have watched all of the *Survivor* seasons, and really knew how to play the game, which you could have never told by CBS' portrayal of me. I'm not just a 'cute, sickly' Southern girl -- which is what CBS depicted." The fact that Vance had some input into her fictionalized actions may have helped with this. She did, however, suggest that she is not as cocky as Lanza may have depicted.

Harkey's only nitpick was a scene where Lanza had him sing along to a Britney Spears song, which he is not familiar with, and Vance noted this too. "I knew Peter probably didn't know [her] songs," Lanza told me, "but it was too funny a scene not to use. And he took it in good humor." Gabe also had a small complaint, according to Lanza: "Around Episode 3, I had started to make Gabriel a bit cocky. [He complained] and he was right. I had gotten lazy...and didn't notice I was turning him into the villain. I thanked him for pointing it out and fixed it. It wasn't a big deal, but that was the only small complaint I ever got" from a contestant.

The contestants I interviewed said they enjoyed seeing themselves go farther in Lanza's fiction than they had in real life. It was a "wonderful psychological boost, just to imagine being out there again," Cade told me. "I was sad to get voted out [in the novel]...but only on a superficial level."

Vance and Glover both “won” fictional versions of the game, and both loved seeing it come to pass. “Of course I loved reading that I had won, even if it was only on paper!” Glover told me. As for Vance: “I loved seeing my character win the game. Although it was fictional, it was very fun and exciting to see the characters compete and react with one another. To win was sweet. I still ponder to this day how I would have done if I hadn’t been sick.” In other words, although their fictional successes did not make up for their real-life letdown at being voted out of *Survivor*, it still felt good, which speaks to the believability and authenticity of Lanza’s work.

Finally, contestants sometimes find that Lanza’s work “feels” real, despite having experienced *Survivor* themselves: “Diane Ogden wrote me after Episode 1 of *Greece* and thanked me that none of the first boots [from prior actual seasons] went first again,” Lanza said. “I think that touched her. She seemed legitimately concerned about it.”

And if an actual contestant has that kind of reaction, just imagine how fans – who have only experienced *Survivor* via the mediation of TV – might take Lanza’s stories.

Rewriting *Survivor*: Fan Reactions

Fans respond to the *Survivor* fiction much like they do the show itself, reacting strongly to certain players and speculating as to what will happen next. Treatment of the real series is far more involved and intense, but Lanza’s last two projects have spurred more than 800 posts apiece on SurvivorSucks.³⁰

³⁰ The *Alaska* thread can be found at <http://pub207.ezboard.com/fsurvivorsucksfrm17.showMessageRange?topicID=2527.topic&start=241&stop=260>. For Hawks9’s comments, see Page 13 of it; for Colleenlover’s, see Page 15. The *Greece* thread is at <http://pub207.ezboard.com/fsurvivorsucksfrm17.showMessageRange?topicID=3227.topic&start=1&stop=20>; for Colleenlover, see Page 2; for Yankees42789, Page 7.

Fans have come to anticipate Lanza's work, which many see as in the very high end in terms of quality, especially so far as fan fiction goes. "You never cease to impress," wrote Colleenlover in advance of *Greece*'s debut. "This should be yet another exciting ride. I think I enjoy this more than the actual series."

"I read [*Hawaii* and *Alaska*] and felt they were far more dramatic and interesting than" the real show, wrote one fan, Look Closer, in reply to my questionnaire. "The ending of the *Alaska* story was perfect (well, almost perfect, I was rooting for Greg)." Others said they found it silly to compare the "real" TV show and fictional prose.

Some SurvivorSucks posters, Colleenlover among them, regularly speculate as to what might happen down the road, and why. Yankees42789 wrote the following one episode into *Greece*: "Two main reasons pop out in my mind as to why Gabe and Hunter won't win, and probably not make the Final Four. The first is that when it comes down to it, they will want to get each other out. They'll eventually rally support against one another and basically they'll both fall, around the merge time. The second reason is that they seem cocky. Cocky players never win *Survivor*. Period."

Some online fans create Web pages dedicated to covering the novels³¹, simulating those that cover the real *Survivor*. They list things such as "boot speculation," which involves posting the chances each remaining player has to win, and players' voting histories. All this reflects Jenkins' contentions about fan fiction: "They are satisfying narratives, eagerly received by a fan readership already primed to accept and appreciate their particular versions of the program." (1992, 155)

Fans are even willing to allow Lanza leeway with the *Survivor* meta-text. PlayinWithFire wrote in reply to my survey, "When [characters'] actions deviated from

their portrayal on the [real] show (e.g. Jerri being nice), Mario gave a good reason why. That was more interesting than if he had wrote them *exactly* like how they were on the show -- it showed character growth, something that I like in stories, but is often missing from the TV show (since everyone is cast as a stereotype).” (Note that, oddly, Jerri has acted nice, or has at least been portrayed as such, on the real-life *Survivor: All-Stars*.)

Still, some become upset when fan favorites are voted out. After the writers dispatched the popular Jeff Varner³² in Episode 4 of *Alaska*, many were nonplussed. “I hope the actual *All-Star Survivor* isn’t as crap as this Alaskan one is turning into,” Hawks9 wrote. “Bring back Varner and Kelly G. They were the two people I was most looking forward to seeing, and they’ve been unexpectedly and unfairly voted off.”

Others were more blunt: “I bet ya any money, everyone wanted Jeff to stay and Brian to go! I was looking forward to Jeff getting a chance at winning again after 2 years, and you’ve ruined everything! ...BRING JEFF BACK! BRING JEFF BACK! BRING JEFF BACK! BRING JEFF BACK!” wrote someone else, who later deleted their posts.

Yet some sprung to Lanza and company’s defense. Said ColleenLover: “I think many of you outraged by Jeff Varner’s departure...have to remember: The writers are not writing this as much as they are reporting this. It is essentially beyond their control. I have not seen one false move yet.... Much like the show, you have to give yourself over to the reality of the situation. If you want [Jeff or others] to be in a situation you think is cool or ideal, then it is pretty much fantasy, not an extension of the reality program we’re fascinated in.” In the online world, such replies are instant; in the past, they may have taken weeks. So again we see how the Internet has affected the fan community.

³¹ Most of these are now defunct, as the final Greece episode was posted in August.

These conflicting responses also reflect what could be viewed as competing overall meta-texts of *Survivor*: first, the love of specific strategic players such as Jeff Varner, Richard Hatch, Jerri Manthey, Kelly Goldsmith and Rob Cesternino and a desire to see them do well at the game, fictional or not; and second, the belief that, in a “reality” situation, the Hollywood ending is unrealistic – it’s like expecting a favorite sports team to go undefeated annually. If fans don’t get their ideal ending on the real *Survivor*, they want Lanza to deliver it instead – but if he wants to remain true to the game on which his work is based, that’s an impossible task. Indeed, when he starts a story, he doesn’t know who will win in the end. Much depends down to the random draws he makes to decide who wins immunity in each episode.

He has learned how to respond to such critiques: “Show the why and you can do most anything,” Lanza told me in an instant message. “All you need is a realistic motive. My rationale after three stories is this: I don't have to justify actions to the readers. I just have to make it sound like it could happen. [Otherwise] you sound defensive.”

Lanza has thus far avoided the worst offense a fan fiction writer (or even a TV writer or editor) can commit – something known by the ugly phrase of “character rape.” (Jenkins 1988, 487) Jenkins quotes *Star Trek* fan fiction writer Kendra Hunter:

A writer, either professional or amateur, must realize that she...is not omnipotent. She cannot force her characters to do as she pleases.... The writer must have respect for her characters or those created by others that she is using, and have a full working knowledge of each before committing her words to paper. (1988, 487)

However, Lanza admits to two moderate character-related mistakes, such as when he did not veto having two characters get into an argument over an machete, and when his eventual Alaska winner, Helen Glover, lied to another player about a “final two

³² Varner was voted out of *Australian Outback* in 10th place, after a tie-breaker at Tribal Council that some felt was not the most fair way to go.

alliance.” Lanza edited the story after it was posted to mitigate what he called “the worst screw-up I have ever perpetrated in any of the episodes.”

Still, this by no means rises to the level of character rape, and fan response to Lanza’s work has been overwhelmingly positive, because of the quality of the writing, characterizations that adhere to the meta-text (or are justified when they stray from it) and depth of plot. Wrote mds2929 in reply to my SurvivorSucks survey:

Mario usually isn’t trying to fool [us like Burnett] often does. Of course, [Burnett] must create intrigue through vagueness and (often) false promise to get people to tune in, but nonetheless many fans would love to see the motivation behind certain moves instead of being blindsided by results that, at the time, can seem nonsensical and confusing. In Mario’s stories, we get the behind the scenes info.... We are allowed to know why people like/dislike each other, who talks to whom, if a character’s background/personality is the reason for their moves, and the back alley dealings that [Burnett] almost never shows us. While many of boots aren’t revealed until Tribal Council (as with the actual show), I cannot recall ever finishing an episode and being unable to understand the justification for a boot. While I don’t always agree 100 percent with every result, I cannot say that any were anywhere close to being even 5 percent wrong.

Finally, Lanza is also always willing to hear constructive criticism, which again jives with Jenkins’s fan fiction studies: “Fanzine editors and writers remain more responsive than commercial producers to the desires and interests of their readership.... Even after they are published, the community offers feedback, designed to help the writers better satisfy fan tastes in future productions.” (1992, 159-161)

Conclusion

The online *Survivor* community has latched onto Mario Lanza’s three “All-Star” fan fiction novels, viewing them as worthy extensions of the program they cherish. This reflects the work of Henry Jenkins III, whose ideas have even more relevance in today’s fast-paced Internet age. “One becomes a fan not by being a regular viewer of a program but by translating that viewing into some type of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a community of other fans

who share common interests,” Jenkins wrote. “For fans, consumption sparks production, reading generates writing, until the terms seem logically inseparable.” (1988, 473)

While staying aware that all this is fiction, not “real” like the show, fans recognize the novels’ authenticity. “As for why I read them, it is mostly because I am a huge *Survivor* fan who is also a fan of quality writing,” noted mds2929. “I have read a decent amount of fan [fiction], and after a couple of episodes, most become unreadable, because the authors do not put the time into thought, character realism, and/or consultation. Mario does all three.” Even those whom he has appropriated for his novels read them, further demonstrating their realism. Others have also written, or at least begun, *Survivor* fiction, but Lanza’s is the most prominent.

With the real-life *Survivor: All-Stars* now airing, it appears Lanza and others’ fiction has become reality. And just as Mark Burnett frequently tweaks his game to avoid boring his audience, Lanza has proven he too can take risks – witness his *Greece* novel, featuring 16 people viewers barely got to know. He’s unsure of what, if anything, he’ll try next – “I think ‘All-Star’ stories are kind of been there, done that now,” he wrote in response to my survey. “I don’t want to beat the concept into the ground like a [*Saturday Night Live*] skit. I may try some other variation in the future.”

Survivor fans – and former contestants – are waiting.

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