Söyleşi
Interview

IN CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR HENRY JENKINS

Diğdem Sezen

Abstract

The following interview includes Professor Henry Jenkins' answers to the questions of Dr Diğdem Sezen regarding transmedia storytelling, new media literacies and fan culture. The interview, hosted by Istinye University, was held online on 5 November, 2022, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of John Berger's book 'Ways of Seeing'.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Henry Jenkins, transmedia storytelling, new media literacies, fan culture.

Geliş Tarihi | Received: 22.12.2022 • Kabul Tarihi | Accepted: 25.12.2022
Dr., Teesside University
ORCID: https://orcid.org/ 0000-0001-9892-7274 - E-Posta: D.Sezen@tees.ac.uk

Sezen, D. (2021). Henry Jenkins'le Söyleşi. *sinecine*, 12(3), 123-143.

HENRY JENKINS'LE SÖYLEŞİ

Öz

Söyleşi Profesör Henry Jenkins'in Dr. Diğdem Sezen'in transmedya hikâye anlatıcılığı, yeni medya okuryazarlıkları ve hayran kültürü hakkındaki sorularına verdiği yanıtları içermektedir. İstinye Üniversitesi›nin ev sahipliği yaptığı söyleşi, John Berger›in ‹Görme Biçimleri› kitabının 50. yıldönümü vesilesiyle 5 Kasım 2022 tarihinde çevrimiçi olarak gerçekleştirildi.

Keywords: Henry Jenkins, transmedya hikâye anlatıcılığı, yeni medya okuryazarlığı, hayran kültürü.

Professor Henry Jenkins is an American media scholar and a Provost Professor of Communication, Journalism, and the Cinematic Arts, holding a joint professorship at the University of Southern California (USC) Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and the USC School of Cinematic Arts. Professor Jenkins is also the co-founder of the Comparative Media Studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Professor Jenkins has authored and co-authored over a dozen books including the following; *What Made Pistachio Nuts?*, *Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (1989), *Textual Poachers, Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), *Convergence Culture, Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), *Spreadable Media, Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (2013), *By Any Media Necessary, The New Youth Activism*, and *Connected Youth and Digital Futures* (2016).

Beyond his home country of the United States and the broader English-speaking world, the impact of Professor Jenkins' work (especially his transmedia storytelling and participatory culture work) on media academics as well as practitioners has been notable, across Europe as well as in Brazil and India. His books have been translated into Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Turkish.

Dr Diğdem Sezen *is a senior lecturer in Transmedia Production at Teesside University, School of Arts and Creative Industries, UK. She holds a PhD from Istanbul University. She was awarded a Fulbright scholarship for her doctoral studies and visited the Georgia Institute of Technology, School of Digital Media. She acquired the Turkish equivalent of a habilitation degree in Visual Communication Design with a focus on Digital Game Design in 2017. Before joining Teesside, she was an associate professor at Istanbul University and a visiting research fellow at Rhein Waal University in Germany. Her main research interests include games, interactive narratives, transmedia storytelling and digital culture. She has also co-edited books and published book chapters, journal articles, conference papers, and encyclopaedia articles across this spectrum.*

Diğdem Sezen: Professor Jenkins, thank you very much for joining us today. We are very, very happy to have you here virtually.

Henry Jenkins: I'm delighted to be here, and very honoured to be here in part of the celebration of John Berger's work. I read *Ways of Seeing* in high school, and it really deeply shaped my understanding and entry into media studies at large, and I come back, and re-read that book, or watch the series that grew out of it periodically. I quoted it in my most recent book, *Comics and Stuff*, where I draw on some of the writing about still life, where he was taking on the degree to which still life was a way of displaying people's possessions, and therefore far from above the world as we often position high art, but very much of its time of the commercial cultures of the Netherlands and the Low Countries more broadly. I think he remains, as you say, a crucial figure to read as we try to map the changing media environment.

DS: First of all, I should say that this is a privilege for me, being part of this panel. I first met Professor Jenkins as early as 2007, attending the 'Media in Transition 5' conference in Boston at MIT. Back then I was a first-year PhD student accepted to a media studies program at Istanbul University and Media in Transition conferences that year, and the following years influenced and inspired my scholarly work and interests. Today, I'm working as a senior lecturer in Transmedia Production. So, I think this shows that well. For today, the title of our talk is Transmedia Storytelling, but we will also discuss some other questions about media literacy, participatory culture and fan culture in general. So, Professor Jenkins, I will jump-start with my questions if I may.

It's been twenty years since you popularized the concept of transmedia storytelling, and over the years you have approached it from different perspectives, and introduced new aspects and identified new types and, looking back at the evolution of the concept and your role in defining it, can you say that transmedia storytelling is a mature concept with established patterns today, or is it still evolving?

HJ: I would say both. At the level of large-scale media industries, it is very much a mature concept which we might see illustrated by the Marvel Cinematic Universe and its continual expansion. But it's only recently really that Marvel's expansion has extended into transmedia production.

I would say it's with Disney+ taking over the Marvel series, and we can now see something like *Dr Strange*, and it grows out of *WandaVision* and out of *What If...?* and out of *Loki*. All of that whole notion of the multiverse has been built step by step and, through the extension on television of the films themselves, and that large-scale intertextuality, we can now see what an incredibly successful business model it is. I would say *Star Wars* less consistently in terms of its television work, but still pretty decisively, has moved in a similar direction. So this is kind of the growth of the mothership model, as I've written about, where you have a core text or collection of texts, *the Avengers* films in the case of the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* where everything else connects to it and, what *Marvel* is pushing us to think about is, how far can this go on before the audience just gets exhausted, not with watching the movies, but feeling like they can't miss one if they want to understand the whole. *Marvel* comics periodically burns it all to the ground and rebuilds its comic series afresh, because the continuity becomes too interwoven for people to follow. I think the question is when does that happen for the MCU? On the independent media side, though I think we're still seeing lots of experimentation.

I was just speaking yesterday with the directors of the Open Doc Lab at MIT, which is part of the Comparative Media Studies (CMS) legacy, and they're still pushing and experimenting with what transmedia documentaries look like, and trying a range of different models to explore what the implications of this per se non-fiction productions are. So, I think there's still plenty of room for innovation, and experimentation. However, I'm not ready to offer a stable definition of everything that transmedia can do, and I certainly don't want to see the high-budget Hollywood model rule out other experimentation that might take place with smaller cinemas around the world, or smaller TV productions around the world, with many countries still getting involved in transmedia for the first time.

> **DS:** You also developed a very influential, transmedia storytelling syllabus for transmedia storytelling education, and you also shared it online and updated it through time. Could you talk about the process behind it? How did your transmedia storytelling syllabus change over the years? What were the driving factors and motivations behind it, and how is your syllabus structured today?

HJ: Well, I have not taught that course in a while. I'm teaching a different way into it called *Imaginary Worlds*, which I'll say something about at the end. But to take this chronologically, the earliest seeds of this course

were a series of workshops we ran through the Comparative Media Studies program every January. They were a week-long, intensive workshop about transforming existing media into games, and it was a thought prompt experiment to get people thinking about what the properties of games are, how they shape our experience and to what degrees, the narrative part of games, and so forth. We were lucky to partner with Sony Image Works who brought their people in to share with our people what was going on. In that week-long intensive course, teams of students would choose an existing media property, develop pretty deeply a model of how they might convert it into a game, and then they would present it as a competition. So, what I took from that was the core of my course, and transmedia has always been the pitch as a showcase of what you learn throughout the semester. What I was able to do in Hollywood, replicating to some degree what was happening in Boston, was to bring in old and new media executives who were regularly pitched to as judges and to provide feedback. Judges not in the evaluative sense, but in the sense that they shared their impressions of what they saw, and the USC students and the MIT students were consistently five to ten years out, and from industry practice, they were able to project it in many ways, remarkable ways sometimes. So, that was part one. Part two was having moved to LA, I was then able to bring a lot more representatives from the local industry, and everything from comic book writers to game designers to television producers and writers, and so forth. But the core of it was the framework of this, the basic principles of transmedia that had been a conference presentation I did. I put it on my blog just to capture the presentation. It now seems to be codified worldwide, which was not really the goal. It was meant to be the start of a conversation, not a kind of canonization or a particular set of categories, but I started teaching the class using those categories, and the categories are elastic enough, and then I could keep up with technological change, and industry change through those categories. So, the day-by-day breakdown did not shift very much, but what we started seeing was the word transmedia get applied to things other than fictional films and television shows. It started getting applied to documentaries, to advertising and branding strategies, to performance strategies, to diplomacy, science, education, activism, and all kinds of categories where people were using thinking across media and keeping in mind that transmedia by itself simply means across media. It's an adjective in search of a noun, and the nouns that get attached to it kept growing, and so I needed to keep adding some

of those alternatives into the design of the course. But where I'm at now was that I felt like what unified so much of this was this idea of worlds and worldbuilding, and so I wanted to drill into that with my most recent course. What is a world? How are worlds organized across media? What has shifted in the way worlds operate in media over time, because one of the reasons I was drawn to the world was, I think, the richest transmedia text has a world at the core. But, secondly, was that something like Marvel Cinematic Universe was incredibly intricate, but mostly on the level of a single medium. So, it wasn't transmedia until the TV pieces came in, but it was an extraordinary worldbuilding, and that needed recognition and exploration. So, the premise of this course is, if we look across the twenty American films, in particular across the twentieth century, we see a movement from the set as probably decorative elements on a stage where the action takes place to it becoming a setting where we see the projection of the character onto their physical surroundings. A big idea for V. F. Perkins in the 1950s when he started out writing about melodramatic films, but I think applies to other films. as we go forward. Since then, we've seen a deepening of the density of information conveyed about the world. So, at this point, my class is looking at Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*, which is just an immersive experience of the nineteenth century. All are bombarding us from all sides. I mean there are so many long walks taken by the characters down busy urban streets, and we see out of the corner of our eye some of the practices, music, food, dress, and subcultural identifications of the nineteenth century; but that's very much what we would also see in a recent film like *Dune*. *Dune* does an extraordinary job of worldbuilding. So, what we are doing there is bringing art directors and costume designers from Hollywood into the classroom, and just learning from them their perspectives on what it is to build a world. Because if we're building what we're talking about, very little of that comes from the scriptwriter per se; much of it comes from production, design, and costume design, which is where we get most of our information about worlds, and it used to be that this was a largely invisible push to the background. Now we learn to scan our environment and every detail matters, and that wealth of detail is being developed, not by the director or producer, or scriptwriter, but by the production designers. So, we had Alex McDowell, who built *Minority Report* literally from the ground up. This Philip K. Dick short story that it is based on has almost no descriptive detail. He started the project the same day as the scriptwriter, so there was no script, and he designed a world that

the scriptwriter then incorporated into his work. Something we hear a lot from talking to these production designers, is this idea that the set piece is exactly right, that it starts with the set, and then a kind of action takes place through the set, and then the screenwriter has to stitch these set pieces together to form the film. Now, such stitching together can occur within the film, but it also can occur across other media, where we illuminate a number of the details that we see on the screen, and they become building blocks for something else. This idea of the Easter egg as an element we recognize in the film and connect with the narrative someplace else has become part of the pleasure of watching any number of contemporary franchise films. So, right now, I'm really drilling into the world-making part that may become a book for me down the line. I'm thinking about it, anyway.

> **DS:** We're very eager to read it. Also, you mentioned in your blog and you post about global examples, approaches and trends of transmedia storytelling and fandom. I believe you have a unique position to see the patterns in global trends. In the last few years especially, have you observed any interesting non-Western trends in transmedia storytelling? Are there non-Western lessons transmedia practitioners we should take notice of?

HJ: Well, I think if we tour the globe, the non-western portions of the globe, we could, for example, see Korea and the rise of K-Pop and K-drama, as maybe one of the most visible corners of the globe right now. K-Pop is particularly interesting because the performers are often framed with fictional identities and embedded within a larger world mythology, that is, it sort of stands on its own, but extends outward into a variety of tasks; and if you open an album, a recording of a K-Pop artist, all kinds of material things, different kinds of print come bumbling out such as videos, and games and so forth. This is because the packaging of music there is about transmedia, and that helps to make the BTS Army one of the most powerful cultural forces in the world today. So, that's a place that I would look at.

I would look at China trying very hard to create commercial entertainment for both the local market and for export that follows genres. We're seeing more and more science fiction texts coming out of China. Since it's all state-owned, coordination is in theory a possibility. We're still not seeing as much transmedia out of China as we might expect. Japan and its culture of the media mix are really what the American Western ver-

sion of transmedia was inspired by. So, they continue to stretch ahead in the integration of Manga, anime, live-action cinema, live performance and so forth.

India certainly is a huge media powerhouse. There is less transmedia there so far, but in part, I think, because they don't need it when you've got three hours plus running time, and you absorb multiple genres into a film like *RRR*. Then you see most of the functions that Hollywood separates out from the different media channels existing within the same text. India has long had transmedia at the level of performance, where the songs in a Bollywood film spread across the culture through mix tapes which are performed by amateurs at cultural shows. That I also would describe as a more participatory form of transmedia.

Now I'm still learning about media production in Turkey. What I do know from my Turkish students is that it is now one of the biggest television producers in the world. The Turkish media spreads across the Middle East, Africa and, to some degree, both Asia and Latin America. We have a certain percentage of it available through streaming platforms in the US, but I would say it's one *Squid Game* away from becoming a really visible media tradition in America. It's not quite on the radar of most of us. My podcast episode this week, that dropped on Tuesday, is about Zeki Müren and features a Turkish filmmaker who did the *Zeki Müren Hotline*, and we dug somewhat into Turkish pop culture through that process, and I encourage people there to check it out.

> **DS:** I would also like to ask you about the Covid 19 pandemic. These new conditions intensified our digital experiences, and we continue to experience their continuing effects in our lives. So, how has the pandemic impacted digital culture and entertainment in general?

HJ: Oh, I wrote a piece about this specifically, at the request of a Turkish publication, so some of you may have seen where I compared Zoom to Dziga Vertov's idea of constructing a room where the walls are in different places. It's part of his long discussion of montage, where he imagines building women and building space and so forth. I think that's exactly what Zoom is, we're having a conversation right now, and it feels very natural, but we're all in different spaces, and if we look at the little windows, we mentally are constructing a composite of that space, so that we can imagine ourselves more fully immersed in a conversation.

For me, I've had the chance to give talks all over the world. I think I've done seven talks to Turkey in the last three years. I've spoken to Kazakhstan for example. I've spoken to all kinds of countries. In the Turkish case, I spent one evening in your country and want to go back for more. Kazakhstan, I don't know that I'll ever go to Kazakhstan, then, I had to lecture at one in the morning to make it work, but the sense of that immediate connection is very real. But the second thing I would say about the digital media and Covid times was that it's a thought experiment in a way, that, if you took cinema out and you slowed the production of television, where would our media texts come from? I think there's plenty of signs that around the world where people are entertaining each other, it created, cleared the space for grassroots media to become more visible, and allowed, say, podcasts to really sync deeper into the culture. It allowed for YouTube and Tik Tok and these other platforms to become more central to our culture than ever before. A lot of it was people in their living rooms who were bored, making things to share with each other that really reflects the cultural creativity of everyday people. Again, something like, Bo Burnham did an hour-long show from his house, that won all kinds of awards, including the Peabody Award, and it's just a commercial artist`s attempt to replicate the aesthetic experience of watching people perform in their living room for each other.

> **DS:** I would like to move a little bit into new media literacies and participatory culture and your concept of 'spreadability'. This concept emphasizes the agency of people in participatory culture, and when you look at today's media environment, we do continue to create and circulate content. At the same time though, we keep feeding an array of immensely powerful AI systems with information about how to identify people, how to identify objects, places, preferences, habits, genders, economic status, and much more. The more accurate they become, the more influence they have on everyday life, and most of the time we don't know why we see what we see, and our relationships with these systems are very enigmatic. So, can we still become media literate in today's algorithmically-driven culture and society?

HJ: Well, I think, first of all, when we published *Spreadable Media*, it was probably the last moment we could have published that book without really getting into the algorithmic stuff. This is because they were just starting to become visible and literally became more visible to many of us

in the window between when the book went to press, and when the book came out, which is always the awkward thing when you write about contemporary culture. So, I couldn't write the book today without factoring that in, and it is far from transparent, as you're noting. So, I know people who are doing a great job studying algorithmic culture. *The International Journal of Media Literacy* just put out a special issue all about algorithmic culture, including ways that math teachers might bring media literacy into their classroom by making this algorithm-based media ecology more transparent to students. But really, the challenge is mapping something we can't see, where most of the core information is regarded as trade secrets. The impact is only really felt when we can't see it; it has to be invisible from the point of view of our digital overlords. I don't think it totally overrides the notion of spreadability, but it reshapes the circuits by which things spread, and it changes the balance of power to a large degree. We're seeing things that did not get curated and transmitted by the audience circulating through our YouTube beads, or whatever, and we can't really know to what degree something is bubbled up from grassroots, and what degree it was made accessible to us by some other hidden mechanism, and then people choose to amplify it. I do think that not everything the algorithm pushes on us, we push on. I know every morning I'm making lots of choices about what media to pass along to who, but I do think it's an important force that one has to factor in when we're thinking about the notion of spreadability, and pulls us closer to virality, insofar as it's seen as involuntary as not under our control, as not visible to us, as inadvertent in the ways that I would say the true notion of virality would require. So, I'm not giving up on human agency, but it doesn't exist in a vacuum.

> **DS:** I want to also ask you about Twitter and new ownership developments. What do you think about the role of ownership and legal regulation in shaping online communication and community building? What do you think about the current change in Twitter's ownership and discussions on online disinformation in the United States?

HJ: Well, Elon Musk is a very complicated figure. I think I'm holding back until I see more fully what's taking place here. We can see a shift in how content regulation is working, but not fully know what its impact is going to be. I mean, content regulation was fairly new on Twitter, to begin with, because, this need for it was created by Trump and his followers

in the American context, where we saw misinformation, inflammatory information, and hate speech leading up to our insurrection in Washington, and the attempt to overthrow the election process in the United States, things that used to be sacred across all parties. That we would put our democracy at risk in the way that this happened is horrific.

Nevertheless, there was immediate pressure from the public to put some constraints on what was being transmitted through Twitter. Elon Musk seems to want to take some of those constraints away. We saw a dramatic decrease in the flow of misinformation when those constraints were put into place, and I don't have the numbers in front of me, but it was pretty significant, and once you took Trump out of the Twitter economy, things improved pretty demonstrably. But, I've always been an absolute advocate for free speech, and free expression. Yet this, all of this, leaves me pause. Can you have absolute free speech in a world where you have so many people getting it for the first time, who have no ethical training, no media literacy, and so forth? I had always thought the Internet communities would regulate themselves, and they have grown at a rate so large that self-regulation and then cultivation of shared norms just hasn't taken place, and that means it's becoming an increasingly treacherous space within which free speech is operating. And I think, it turns out, that, you know, the old joke was free press was for anyone who could afford a printing press, and the people who couldn't afford a printing press did not really enjoy free press in the United States. Well, now we have a place where almost anyone can afford a printing press, but it turns out that the institutional stakes of holding on to your printing press leads to certain kinds of accountability and responsibility, and sets up a set of norms within which the press operates in the United States. And once we open it up totally, what we're seeing is the people who have nothing to lose, and no deep long-term investment in the communication environment, aren't bound by those norms and are doing things that are highly destructive to democracy as a whole. So, as a media literacy advocate, I think one of the first things we've got to do is to hold ourselves accountable for our own acts of writing and speaking, and we need to hold each other accountable for those acts. But I don't mean it in this kind of cancel culture way that we've seen, where one accusation leads to a mob rule that, you know, silences people, but rather a careful articulation of norms of what is acceptable within a given community that will result in a kind of moderation effect, at least for those who want to remain within a social community. I don't know what that does to the real outliers of any

given society. But the mainstream of a culture could be more self-regulated in ways that foster greater accountability and responsibility. And that's really what I would look for.

I think Twitter is going to be moving in the opposite direction from there, and that's a dangerous trend. But I don't know and I don't want to prejudge what happens until we actually see. This is because there's so much prejudging going on around this Twitter change, and there is too much prejudging across the board taking place on Twitter that, you know, one wants to be slow, moderate, careful in predicting outcomes. And this is just too new a development.

> **DS:** These days, I observe some academics I follow on Twitter that are migrating to decentralized social media like Mastodon. So how do you interpret this? Is this a viable option in the long term?

HJ: Well, if they all navigated to the same one, maybe. Otherwise, you're just fragmenting your communication and making it less effective at reaching things. Or you're focusing your communication on your own tribe even more, and those ideas will have more trouble getting out. So, one thing that I like about Twitter, and I have a lot of followers on Twitter but I forget the current numbers, is that it allows academics to speak directly to parts of the culture that are not paying attention to academic conversations, and to shape some of the ideas that circulate within the culture. If academics, I would say, use Mastodon as an example, and I'll go there, but no one else does, then academics are cutting themselves off from those larger conversations yet again. So, I think you want to focus on places where there is a significant scale public, which may mean that we are vulnerable to Twitter and doing that. And, in an anti-intellectual climate, academic vulnerability on Twitter is a very real thing.

I've seen multiple attempts to try to cancel me through Twitter, and it's scary how it happens and how it overwhelms. Large numbers of people who don't have a clue who you are, are suddenly attacking you about one or two things that may not even have been you, and that kind of attack is something that terrifies a lot of academics and is the reason why they're retreating yet again to ivory towers. I think it's possible for a social media app to become an ivory tower fairly easily.

> **DS:** You've been studying fan culture for decades from multiple perspectives. How would you describe the key aspects of fandom which remained unchanged in this period in contrast to the major

changes you observed? What role does the evolution of the media ecology play in the possible transformation of fandom?

HJ: Well, I think, there is not a single fandom. I would first insist that we talk about fandoms, and the more we study it, the more it's clear there are very different kinds of fan practices and communities around the world. One of the tensions in *Textual Poachers* was that I was commissioned to write a book, a general theory of fans and fandom. I increasingly realized that was impossible, and wrote about a specific community of fans, and in that community`s practices became normalized in the field for a long time, so people weren't looking beyond them. That community, I think, still does what I describe there. They are active creators of new kinds of media practices, whether it's fan fiction, and we see the explosion of something like *Archive of Our Own*, which is a platform for fan fiction run by fans. That I see, is still one of the great triumphs of participatory culture in the network era, alongside Wikipedia. To me, those are the two, the Great Wall of China, as it were, the wonder, in the contemporary world, in terms of what people can build bottom up that has an encyclopaedic quality to it. So, they're doing fan fiction, they're doing 'vidding', they're doing 'cosplay', they're doing other new media forms that are still emerging. And, in doing so they're exploring questions of gender, sexuality and, increasingly, of race in very reflective ways. I think if there is a rethinking of the building blocks of stories in the West around race, it is going to come from something like that, and thousands and millions of fan writers exploring, experimenting, and questioning each other's versions of it as we develop new genres, because the genres we have are products of a Colonialist settler society. We can't just put black and brown faces in the middle of those stories and have them be all okay, because the underlying premises are bound up with colonialism. So instead, we've got to rethink them from the ground up, and the best way to do that is to turn to those storytellers. So, I think that stuff stays the same. I think we're seeing an increased friction between those fans and other fans in various societies around the world. I got involved in China and the Chinese government ended up shutting down *Archive of Our Own* in China because of a friction between fans of a particular idol, and the kind of idol culture of Asia meeting fan fiction writers who were drawn to the character that idol played in a particular television show, and were doing what fan fiction writers do, which included exploring queer sexualities around this character and the idol culture. The impulse is to protect the idol, the fans are to explore as many different possibilities as they

can. Those two things came at odds with each other, and eventually the Government intervened and used it as a pretext to silence a lot of grassroots storytelling all at once by shutting down this platform. So, as we look globally, I spent last year on my blog on what I call the global fandom jamboree, and we brought together scholars from forty countries to talk about what fandom looks like, what fandom studies look like in their culture, and there was an entry from one of my former grad students about Turkey in that mix. But what we see if we just look at the pictures and, leaving the writing aside, the different kinds of fan spaces around the world. Where does it come from? What does it look like? What practices are there? Who is in those spaces? The pictures tell extraordinary stories about the diversity of fandom in different parts of the world, and that's just coming up, because up to now if that work was being done, it was done in local languages, and not translated into English, or where those of us in the English writing and speaking world saw ourselves as having told the story of fandom. I didn't see it that way, but I think a lot of it is sort of said fandom, and what we do in English-speaking countries, and it turns out the objects, the spaces, the practices are very diverse across the planet, and any commercial film released there has to navigate itself across those various local practices. So, I have a set of slides I like to show that shows *Star Wars* getting taken up in different countries, nesting dolls in Russia, pinatas in Mexico, sand sculpture in Brazil, shadow puppet theatre in Indonesia and Malaysia, and repainting of those images by native Americans and indigenous people across the planet. All of those are fan cultures. So, it's not that I think the fan culture I study has changed that dramatically, but our sense of that, as a whole, is completely broken down. I think we now realize what a mix of global fan cultures there really is out there.

> **DS:** What do you think about the vocal negatively motivated fan practices and platforms, such as 4Chan, and the fans of long-running franchises who sometimes suddenly start to hate new releases and the people producing them. Is 'give the fans what they want' a valid request?

HJ: Well, no, if you take what I just said there, you can't give the fans what they want, because they want different things. You can listen to them. You can respond to them. You can engage with them. But the idea of fan service is way too simple to describe what's going on there. I don't think fan service is a bad thing necessarily. Lots of people see it as creatively selling

out, and to me, that's like saying parent services. When you respond to your children's choice of bedtime stories, and use particular voices that make them laugh, that's what a storyteller does with an audience. So, fan service is not a bad thing, but fan service is definitely not achievable if by that you mean that everyone's going to like what you do. You have to pick a lane and follow it. If, over time, you try to respond to every fan, you're going to end up with a totally incoherent mess. But, the notion, right now, I think what's happening in fandom is again, fandoms, but within the digital space around fandoms is that there are struggles that are taking place around diversity and inclusion primarily, and those are the same struggles that we're taking to in the streets in the US around Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate Crimes and so forth. There is this kind of need to act out, and fandom has become a central space for that. And so, you have groups of mostly white, mostly male, angry fans, who are upset by the 'wokeness' of contemporary popular media, and you have another group of fans who are eager for more diversity, more inclusion and representation, more experimentation with genre, who are pushing in the other direction and, depending on where you put your pin down, is what version of fandom you're going to see. What is it? Is it hostility to diversity? Is it the exploration and desire for more diversity?

What I like is that Hollywood goes to San Diego Comic-con every year, when it looks at an audience, and it looks at probably the most diverse fan convention I've ever been to. It's a convention that's now more than fifty percent female, a growing percentage of fans of colour, and so what they're hearing is the voice of fandom, generally, a voice that is wanting to put down the gas pedal toward diversity. But when they go online, they're still being trolled by these guys who really want to retreat to the past, and a past that they don't even understand. They're telling us that *Star Trek* has never been political before, or that *Twilight Zone* did not include social criticism, and so forth. Those kinds of stances just don't understand the past, the fact that these texts were always political. The politics simply reflected the values of a white majority, and now they're increasingly reflecting the diverse values of a multicultural society. So, that's a battle that's playing out. It's being amplified by other forces. So, if we look at the fight around *The Last Jedi*, we discover two things. We now know that it was a testing ground for Russian hackers to see if they could disrupt communication in the US. It was a practice for the presidential election in 2016, so they were doing their best with bots to divide and fragment that community. Then *Breitbart* and other alt-right groups re-

cruited the best angry screenwriters to write for their publication, and so *Gamergate* and *The Last Jedi* fandom and a number of things spread into the rhetorical strategies of a culture war that we've seen divide America more and more in the last four to six years. So, both of these things stirred up what was already a sizzling tension between these groups of fans and meant that it was going to become more and more of a public spectacle. So, when we talk about angry fans, that's the context where it's coming out of, and I think there's a lot we still need to learn to understand it, and there's thankfully a lot of good work being done on understanding the roots of culture wars within fandom.

> **DS:** You recently announced that you will be closing or changing your very influential blog *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*. What were the motivations behind this change? What should we expect from the new platform you're launching? Will the old archive still be online?

HJ: Anything archival in the blog will certainly stay, but I have been struggling. I started this blog seventeen years ago. I have been turning out three blog posts a week over that long period of time. There're more than two thousand posts through that blog. I was getting tired, you know. I'm not getting any younger. I'm sixty-four years old, and I thought, you know, I wanted to pass this on to the next generation, and I thought I could close it down, but I want a platform. I can continue to write from time to time, but not have the burden of maintaining it. It has increasingly become a community property, and much of my work is amplifying the voices of other writers, rather than getting to write myself, and I wanted to promote a new generation. Really the turning point, and I wanted to do it for a long time, the turning point was this global fandom jamboree where I intentionally recruited advanced graduate students, early career scholars, and independent scholars to write for that series, the voices that are not heard; and when it came time to think about it, I just reached out, and a number of people stepped up and said, "We'd like to contribute to this". So, the idea now is a collectively edited publication. It still puts out two to three posts a week, but each week it is controlled by a different editor. We have about twenty-five editors, very diverse, globally, very diverse, racially, and overwhelmingly female, but there are some male participants, and that mix will each take a week every couple of months, to be responsible for content for that week. They're buddied up. So, someone proves their work, and suggests modifications. It's kind of a beta read, and then the stuff will go out to the world, and we hope to

start that in just a couple of weeks. Right now, we're a little bit in hibernation. Well, the two people are sort of technical folks on the group who are reskinning the blog. The pictures of my books along the outer edge will be replaced by their books or a more diverse set of books. I'm sure some of mine will stay there, but the idea is that it's going to reflect that. The challenge we're facing is that so few of these writers have a book out yet, because they're at such early career stages. We're still trying to sort through that. But it means we'll have more global coverage, which I'm really excited by because we have, you know, basically staff on many different continents, and we will have the same mix of creative industry coverage, fandom coverage, new media and politics, and new media literacies because the people were selected for that. The themes that I have set up over those sixteen, seventeen years will carry through, but there are more diverse voices about it, and I'm really excited by that opportunity because I will be learning something every week alongside everyone else, and fingers crossed it all works. There are lots of things we're still working out. It's going to be a bumpy ride for a few months there, I suspect, but I think, if it works, I said something exciting is going to emerge because so many younger scholars want to blog. They're actively discouraged from doing it by their senior faculty and their department, or said after tenure, and it's a big thing for any one person to take on, and I certainly was post-tenure when I started. However, if they have a chance to try out those skills one week out of every three to four months, that's the right scale for them to do it, where it doesn't take away from the writing they need to do to get tenure, but is beginning to build a public profile around their work, and that's really the goal here.

> **DS:** You're a very active media producer. You have books and blogs, and also the podcast 'How do you like it so far?' with Colin Maclay. What did you learn from your own role as a transmedial public intellectual? How much impact has your blog had beyond academia or in academia?

HJ: Well, I see people teaching individual blog posts. As you mentioned earlier, the syllabi I put up there, has helped to shape what people teach in their classes. It was key throughout most of the process when I was leading the Comparative Media Studies program at MIT that it helped to brand that program, and it's publicized the research, and it became visible much quicker than I think it would have otherwise. So, I am a great believer in the benefits of institutional building levels of academic blog-

ging. But beyond that, it's what you touched on, is that yes, many and most of my readers do not belong in an academic setting. They're not academics. There are industry people, there are policy people. Journalists read it and follow up and write stories about things that I publicize on the blog. Fans, and secondary school teachers. My ideas about fandom and participatory culture are now required as part of the media literacy standards in the UK, for example. So, we're seeing this kind of impact, which I'm quite sure would not have happened if it wasn't for the white paper I wrote for Macarthur, that's circulated via the blog to many countries around the world, and shaped policy discussions about what media literacy means. As a result, it got encoded into many of those standards, so that's I think, where it excites me. Right now, to be honest, my passion is in podcasting, and podcasting allows us to directly hear from people. All along, it has been much easier to get academics to write interviews than it was for non-academics, and the way I do interviews in the blog is, I send them a set of questions written out, they write their response, and then we post it. But most industry people and most non-academics didn't see writing as the best way of presenting their ideas. So now that I can do interviews, we're seeing more activists, we're seeing more artists, and we're seeing more industry people being available to do the shell, and that opening up is part of what really excites me about doing the blog, so I strongly advocate podcasting as a way forward. There was a point about a decade ago with the technology which allowed you to search blogs just broke. Now it is much harder to trace ideas as they spread across blogs than it was in the early days of blogging, and that took the wind out of blogging to a large degree. But podcasting is still growing, and it's still a space where lots of people are willing to try a podcast. Lots of people listen to podcasts for new ideas, and it's a space that I think academics really should be playing, and much more so than we are.

> **DS:** I think I now have my last question for you. What are your current projects? What should we expect from you in the next five years?

HJ: I have a book that is at the peer review at the moment, and it's a book about American boyhood, after the end of World War II through to the end of the 1960s, which is a period where adults were reconceptualizing what a child was, and what the relationship with children was based in part on the baby boom generation. What I'm trying to do is to put in the conversation advice literature for adults, and the media properties that

I remember consuming avidly as a kid, so it's a bit of a memoir, it's a bit of textual analysis, it's a bit of social history woven together to try to give us a snapshot. It's what children's media in the United States was about during this period of time. I have no idea how that will export, whether it will be of interest to people outside the US, but being narcissistic baby boomers, like myself, always love to hear about themselves, and so I think when I talk about it here it gets a lot of excitement. Then I'm now working on a book of advice literature for parents on how to think about media and their families' lives. We hear most of the advice literature that's out there now is about screen time, and just to restrict screen time, and as your kid gets older, keep them off social media, and to snoop behind their backs to see what they're doing. That's the advice parents get. We think that avoids the constructive role that media can play in your life, and that it misses out on a lot of opportunities that media can be used for as a resource for parents connecting with their children. We don't need parents snooping behind their children's shoulders. We need them watching their backs. They need mentorship. They need guidance. They need coaching on how to navigate a complex digital world. We're trying to provide that in this book, and to do that we used a tool that the industry uses to collect interviews with some five hundred parents of different backgrounds in the US, and we are weaving their stories and their best practices throughout this book. Meanwhile, we're doing the work of the *Civic Imagination Project*. The *Civic Imagination Project* started with us monitoring youth activists for the book *By Any Media Necessary*. Then we started taking this idea of civic imagination and tracing it, and what we're seeing worldwide is young people fighting for social change and a vernacular drawn from popular culture, and that's a really interesting development. But then we just took it one step further and reverse-engineered and said, what if we took the best practices of fandom and speculative fiction and brought them into communities in crisis and helped them envision futures for themselves and came to some consensus about the values that should guide their futures? So, we've done sixty of these workshops all over the US and in other parts of the world. We went to a small town in West Virginia recently. This small town is in the process of becoming a twenty-first-century ghost town, because what we're seeing is that they used to be a mining town for coal mining, but the mines closed. They had been a university town for the State. The university closed. Their children are moving away, and the economy is completely falling apart. Yet there are incredible social connections be-

tween these people, and they don't want to move. So, we went in for a day. We met with about twenty people from this town in the university library, which no longer had any books in it. It's an empty library, which is a very chilling thing for me, and we worked through world-building exercises and remixed practices and shared memory objects with each other, out of which we worked with a producer for national public radio in the United States. A podcast called *Us and Them*, and in another couple of weeks they're going to drop the episode; they've edited it out of the sound we collected that day, and we'll hear the voices of coal miners talking about their futures, and I think it's going to be incredible. I mean the day was incredible. We'll see. What we're doing is things like that. We have an incubator for artists in the Appalachian section of the United States, which is where the biggest pockets of poverty are in the United States. We're helping artists tell those stories better across media, using the ideas of the civic imagination, participatory culture, transmedia, and so forth. We're working here in LA, with the building of a Covid Memorial, where we're doing listening sessions and creativity sessions across the city to figure out what the public wants in terms of remembering this tragic period in our culture that took so many lives of people in my city here. So, that's just a few of the things we're doing. Losing the blog means I have more time to devote to something else or letting go of it, and more control by other people means I can focus on some of these other things. So, I'm not slowing down exactly, but I needed to let go of some things to allow other things to grow.

> **DS:** They all sound fascinating and very inspirational. Thank you very much, Professor Jenkins, for your answers to my questions. We hope to host you in Istanbul physically next time.

HJ: I really want to get to Turkey. I spent one memorable evening wandering the streets of Istanbul, too excited to go to sleep, when I was there for a layover with my wife. Eating Turkish delight and sampling the candies, having a really nice meal, feeding the cats and watching the sunrise over the Blue Mosque, all of those were incredible experiences. So, I fell in love with Turkey. I really need to come and spend time there and get to know the incredible people. As I mentioned, I've spent more time on Zoom with Turkey over the last three years than I ever would have imagined. I love the conversations we're having, so I hope I can get there at some point.