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WATTPAD AS AN ONLINE MEDIUM FOR CONTEMPORARY FOLKLORE

BY


ALISHA HELTON

THESIS APPROVED:


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WATTPAD AS AN ONLINE MEDIUM FOR CONTEMPORARY FOLKLORE

BY

ALISHA HELTON

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Eastern Kentucky University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

2022

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my husband, George, whose endless encouragement and support provided the best motivation to tackle this project.

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I would like to thank Gerald Nachtwey, Dominic Ashby, and Susan Kroeg for serving as my thesis committee. Without their thoughtful input and patience, this project would not have grown into what it is today. Their help has been invaluable to the development of my work.

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ABSTRACT

This project focuses its discussion within the discipline of folklore by identifying *Wattpad.com* as a contemporary medium of online folkloric content. Wattpad provides its users with a text-based—and sometimes multimodal—means of communication via its interface that mimics traditional communication as we know it—a means founded in orality, literacy, and the archive. Wattpad users are creating new folktales that are nuanced with elements from Wattpad’s archive, which characterizes contemporary online folklore in a way that has not been fully explored. This project serves to identify the past and present discourses that inform such a discussion while also explaining the intricacies of Wattpad’s interface and user interactions. By studying and exploring such spaces, folklorists may better understand how folklore will continue to evolve into the future.

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I. Introduction

For centuries, people across the world have honed the craft of telling stories. The passing down of this information, of both the content within the stories and the craft of storytelling itself, from one generation to the next is an integral element in the development of almost all existing cultures and societies. The art of storytelling, of creating folkloric content, has evolved alongside those peoples throughout history. As we are entering a new technological age founded in new media, folklore will inevitably evolve once again.

The implications of having folklore present within technology have been studied and discussed since roughly the year 2000. At the forefront of this discussion have been the works of Simon Bronner. In 2009, Bronner argued that Folklore must “be present on the Internet because...e-mail and listservs...have become the primary way that people message, connect, and link, if not talk, to one another” (Bronner, “Digitizing” 24). After explaining this precedent, he then asserts that our prominent use of the Internet allows the web to “incorporate the symbolic and projective functions that folklore distinctively provides” because it allows us to replicate oral communication digitally (Bronner, “Digitizing” 25).

The increase in importance of the World Wide Web, referred to in this discussion as the Internet, in roughly the last decade will inevitably lead to a drastic shift in the way folklore will be transmitted in the future. This shift will generate an

impact even greater than what we have already seen. Natalie Kononenko wonderfully expresses this sentiment with the following: “from looking at village life to studying folk creations online, folklore provides a key to thought, belief, and artistic expression in all contexts...Folklore in all of its forms, be it the lore itself or its use in artistic works, is most worthy of study” (611). As we traverse through present and future folklore, it is the responsibility of the folklorist, the scholar, and the student to document any contemporary changes in the transmittance of folkloric content they might encounter so that it may be discussed and studied.

From roughly 2010 onward, much of the discussion surrounding folklore on the Internet, or online folklore, has debated if folkloric content *can* be created online. Ben Gillis notes that, “in today's changing environment of new, ever-faster methods of communication, modern folklorists must come to terms with their undeniable connection to today's number-one communication device—the Internet” (148). With this project, I am seeking to provide a discussion that is focused beyond the scope of that debate. The following premise, then, serves as this discussion’s foundation: the Internet in and of itself *is* a medium for folkloric content (Blank 1-3; Bronner, “Digitizing” 32; Frank 317; Gillis 148-149; Kononenko 611; Laineste 108-122; McNeill 83).

From its first implementation into society, New Media and the Internet have impacted the functions of human life and communication in ways we could never have anticipated, especially regarding folklore. Our current understanding of folklore, then, must evolve with the society we live in. Foster and Tolbert’s definition of folklore does

just that by emphasizing that, at its root, folklore is created by people in spaces that allow them to communicate with one another. Perhaps in the 2020s, we will see an increase in inclusive and expansive folkloric discourse that is open to, and welcoming of, the new course of direction folklore is taking. Ultimately, “it is time that folklorists look to the Internet, not only to expand our scholastic horizons but also to carry our discipline into the digital age” (Blank 2).

Additionally, to preface the rest of this discussion, the current and modernized definition of folklore this project will utilize as its point of reference is derived from the scholarship of Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert:

The processes and products of folklore tend to be oriented toward *informal, unofficial, noncommercial, noninstitutional* modes of production, transmission, and consumption. Even in context in which traditionality, aesthetics, and the dynamics of “small-group” or face-to-face communication are questionable, we can usually still maintain that the processes and products of folklore are rarely created with official, institutional, or commercial sanction and mass sales or major profit in mind. (7)

This definition of folklore acknowledges that no *single* definition of folklore can ever be definitive, which is important because the nature of folklore itself will never stop evolving with its human counterparts. As a society changes, its people’s folklore will follow suit. Rather than consistently altering the definition of folklore, as has been done in the past, it is better to follow a modern definition that encompasses folklore’s evolving nature.

My goal is to identify a new, more recent space in which folklore is being created on the Internet. That space is a website known as *Wattpad.com*. Though there are many online platforms that serve as mediums for folkloric content already, such as

fanfiction.net and *archiveofourown.org* (AO3), Wattpad itself has yet to be discussed in as much depth by scholars. The academic discourse surrounding Wattpad as a social storytelling platform is just beginning to grow and gain prominence. It is my hope that this project will help paint the picture of Wattpad's contributions to folklore since its establishment in 2006 ("About"). With its increasing popularity, Wattpad will likely have much more of an impact on the creation of contemporary folklore in the near future. Expanding the discourse regarding Wattpad is important for understanding new and upcoming folklore.

For example, the modern evolution of folklore has seen an increase in folkloric content being created on the Internet. Older definitions of folklore, predating the creation of the Internet, cannot encompass the newer nuances that online spaces add to folkloric creation. While not all websites on the Internet are created—or are even practical—for the creation of folkloric content, there are many online spaces that have been designed specifically for storytellers to gather and share their works, *Wattpad.com* being one of those spaces.

Wattpad is an online storytelling platform that puts much emphasis on the creation of online communities and on communication amongst its users. Because the communities and communications that Wattpad fosters are centered around the stories themselves, its website serves as an online medium of folkloric creation. Additionally, Foster and Tolbert's definition of folklore also aligns with the functions of Wattpad, as the folklore that is created within its website takes place via natural communication amongst its users. While Wattpad's interface is designed to foster

community, communication, and the sharing of stories, it is the users interacting with each other that generates Wattpad's folklore.

It is also important to note that though Wattpad may be, in part, motivated by profit, the nature of its users' interactions are, as Foster and Tolbert note, unofficial, noncommercial, and noninstitutional. Given that Wattpad's users have the option to participate in its commercialization (via the Paid Stories program, which will be discussed more in depth later on), they still have the option to participate in its platform noncommercially. For example, a user with popular works has the option to turn down the opportunity to become a Paid Stories author, thereby choosing to not commercialize their work.

Wattpad is, essentially, a community that encompasses all stages of story and folklore creation and all stages of storytelling. For example, werewolves are a folkloric image. They have existed within folklore for centuries. However, there are some versions of the werewolf that are commercialized, like the *Twilight* werewolves, and some versions that are not, like one of the first werewolf depictions in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Wattpad allows for both types of representation to exist within the same platform. Thus, while some users may choose to commercialize their works, that does not mean that other users cannot choose to have their works remain noncommercialized. Additionally, the commercialization of one specific type, or version, of a folkloric image does not mean that the other versions of that same image are also commercialized.

What, then, might Wattpad be doing as a platform that constitutes the study of its folkloric output? How might it be contributing to the creation of folkloric content? Who is creating this content? How might it differ from similar websites? This project will answer these questions by discussing the current discourse surrounding folklore; detailing the functions of *Wattpad.com*; and identifying user behavior that facilitates a folkloric environment amongst other users. It is important to note that my interest in Wattpad, including my knowledge of its functions, is derived from a decade of personal participation in its platform. Throughout the years, Wattpad has grown exponentially, and I expect that such growth will only increase in the years to come.

Because this project will highlight and elaborate on the nature of Wattpad's user interactions, it is relevant to preface this discussion with a brief explanation of what such a claim implies. Communicative interaction on Wattpad requires each user to facilitate their own personal relationship with their online presence, digital orality, and Wattpad's digital archive—essentially combining traditional (or, pre-digital) orality with an online presence. The space in which this presence exists, Wattpad's interface, has blended the concepts of community and archive together, two things that have at times been mostly mutually exclusive.

Though literacy is a byproduct of both pre-digital and digital orality, their differences are founded in the nuances of communicating online. An online space allows individuals to utilize their literacy in an instantaneous, and sometimes more complex manner, by being readily accessible to a worldwide audience. Digital orality also requires a user to maintain a knowledge base founded in understanding the

nuances of *how* to communicate online and how to bridge the gap between cultural and sometimes language barriers they will experience with other users. These barriers are different than with pre-digital orality because pre-digital texts could not receive responses from people across the world within an instant of their publishing. Thus, digital orality requires individuals to possess and maintain a different set of communication skills to navigate online spaces than pre-digital orality required.

The effectiveness of Wattpad's design, layout, and function is a large contributing factor to its ability to serve so successfully as a medium of folkloric content. Its interface (and subsequent function) focuses on sharing, community, creativity, and consumption in a welcoming manner that garners participation founded in those qualities. Having a basic understanding of how Wattpad, as a website, functions in a general sense will allow one to better conceptualize its ability to contribute to folklore. In the following discussion, Wattpad's interface will be discussed in more detail.

Because Wattpad's interface allows its users to interact with each other so thoroughly, the texts stored within its archive serve as hubs for a limitless number of forums. This means that each of Wattpad's texts have the potential to house anywhere from dozens to thousands of forum-like discussions. For example, users can interact with any thread of comments they see while reading a Wattpad text—they must simply select the comment icon in the bottom right corner of every paragraph within the text. They may then peruse those comments, add their own, or message a user directly. When users leave their comments (and/or react to others'), they are

both interacting with the text and with each other—an interaction that will be documented within the archive for others to encounter. Users that are new to these texts and discussions are then informed of several textual discourses that have potentially lasted years, which will influence the nature of their own present-day contributions to those same discourses.

In doing so, Wattpad's online environment mimics traditional (word-of-mouth) folkloric orality while simultaneously creating a space in which literacy and archive allow for a more nuanced and precise level of communication to take place. As Lynne McNeill notes, "browsing the Internet is not a passive experience—users are contributing, communicating, learning, and teaching by example...the Web, just like any public gathering place, has become a setting for normal, informal, daily social interaction" (82). Because "folklore isn't limited [exclusively] to orality," the writing (and permanent documentation) of new online folkloric content in our contemporary society has evolved to accommodate text-based communication (Blank 6). Text-based communication, in turn, alters the very ways in which creators think about, interact with, and write their content because they are aware of its permanence and worldwide reach. Those online, text-based communications serve as the foundation for online folklore.

Walter Ong comments on this dynamic by asserting that "intelligence [as it is associated with writing and creating] is relentlessly reflexive, so that even the external tools that it uses to implement its workings become 'internalized', that is, part of its own reflexive process" (81). In other words, writing within the online archive fosters

innovation because it serves as a new ‘tool’ for users to access when creating new content. When approaching the brainstorming process, the author maintains the ability to utilize the online archive as a tool of writing, which is a precedent for many authors. In other words, this precedent includes the ability to utilize a writing tool in general, which implies that the knowledge or ability to utilize the archive as a tool of writing is a given to a certain extent. This precedent then influences the very nature in which authors approach the creation of a written text—or, in this case, new online folklore.

As Ong notes, “technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word” (82). A user’s ability to utilize an online archival space to create new, written content has greatly impacted the manner in which online folklore is appearing on the Internet. It is also important to note that the very act of writing, in turn, alters the way we approach creating—and even thinking about—new content. The nuances of writing itself will impact the subsequent content that is created. Because spaces like Wattpad have online archives, users’ works and text-based communications may have more intent behind them because the users are aware of the permanence of their work.

Because Wattpad encourages its users to interact with one another in a forum-like manner, many of Wattpad’s texts foster an intricate web of online communities at lightning speeds. These communities are where folklore is generated. Additionally, the comments in these forum-like discussions are always open—meaning they are never turned off or archived as is. This implies that users will always be capable of

engaging in a Wattpad discussion, which invites them to return to Wattpad texts.

Given that there is no finalized version of a text on Wattpad—meaning that the texts and comments never become view-only archived pieces—the content on Wattpad always remains fluid. This is additionally the case for Wattpad’s Paid Stories. Instead of creating folklore and writing it down to be observed, as some archives do, Wattpad invites its users to create their own folklore and allow other users to reinvent it into something new. Thus, a discussion of how Wattpad as a digital platform has accomplished such a feat is not only warranted, but necessary.

II. Research

Online Folklore

Though the content created on Wattpad is not being transmitted traditionally (by word-of-mouth), the space still facilitates the creation of new folkloric content by acting as an online community. This type of community allows its worldwide members to converse and share stories with one another via the written word. It goes without saying that the content being created in online spaces, like Wattpad, is not oral and is instead founded in literacy. However, in contemporary society and its implementation of new media, folklore is no longer strictly limited to word-of-mouth orality and can now incorporate digital orality, as well.

The presence of the Internet in contemporary communication “amplifies the traditional characteristics of oral accounts through the provision of powerful storytelling tools while simultaneously enabling novel methods of narration” (Debies and Jeffrey 44). Folkloric mediums, then, have many new forms—archival online spaces being one of those forms. Wattpad’s fostering of online communities, via forum-like discussions within the archive, creates digital spaces that allow individuals to transmit folklore via written and textual means of communication—otherwise known as online folklore.

In a contemporary context, the archive might manifest as a library, an online database, or public record. Jacques Derrida argues that “the technical structure of the

archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future” (17). The archive retains/houses written work and in turn that work serves to inspire new texts. However, if anything is written having been influenced by the archive in any way, that content will almost always be stylized to some degree to fit into the confines the archive designates—which is true of any type of text (script, scholarship, folktale, etc.). This is because “the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown...There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority” (Derrida 14).

For instance, when publishing work on Wattpad’s archive, users must accept the possibility that others might interact with their work, use their work as inspiration for new content, or possibly even be a source of fanfiction. Essentially, a Wattpad user must consign their work to the other users on Wattpad to some degree. Their text becomes a shared text, which in turn creates a type of repetition—an author’s text inspires new content, which inspires newer content, and so on. In this sense, the “principle of the archive is also a principle of consignation, that is, of gathering together” (Derrida 10). A digital space like Wattpad meets such criteria because its very existence requires its users to subscribe to the archive in this manner.

When creating this type of text-based content, users must accept the possibility that their works may take on an exterior persona—one that expands the author/traditionally-published-text relationship into an author/audience relationship. In many cases, it is very possible for users to have just as much influence on online

texts (like on Wattpad) as the authors that created them. Wattpad, then, serves as a natural archive of literature, folklore, and communication.

Take, for instance, the following messages a Wattpad author, ATTiger, gave their audience before the beginning of their story, *Tiger's Mate*. Their first message is as follows: “this is my own original story...though in this case with the werewolf stuff, some ideas might be inspired by others, but most of the time, still coincidental” (par. 9). While this author is asserting that any similarities between their work and other Wattpad users’ is coincidental—barring some werewolf similarities—they are admitting that their content might actually contain narratological elements that other creators have previously used. Essentially, they are admitting that their work might have ties to other works but that their intention was not to plagiarize. ATTiger’s assertion that their work is original implies that they have added their own twist to the conventions of writing found in similar texts on Wattpad, as there could be similarities.

Additionally, ATTiger speaks directly to the influence of their audience members by also including this message to their Wattpad audience: “if you would like to offer some constructive criticism, feel free to private message me on Wattpad” (par. 13). Here, ATTiger is directly expressing the fact that their audience members are free to critique their work so that they might alter it to better suit the audiences’ needs. With these messages that ATTiger gives their audience, the cyclical nature of Wattpad can be observed: previous texts influence the author, the audience influences the text as it is being created, and that text goes on to inspire newer authors.

Folklore can exist on this type of medium because the nature of its text-based communication allows for the creation of community. This type of community allows its users to instantly share their communications with other users across the world, as seen in ATTiger's request that users direct message them. In turn, that audience can instantly respond to the authors of their choice—eliminating all geographic, cultural, time-based, and (sometimes) language-based barriers that might impede traditional print-based and/or oral communication.

Online communities are not less valid or real because they exist within the Internet. Instead, these online spaces must be considered as new communicational mediums for traditional (word-of-mouth) orality, especially when pertaining to folklore. Anthony Buccitelli notes that it is “the increasingly interactive nature of the Internet...and other forms of digital technology [that] suggest we should no longer look only at communities as bounded either by physical space or by online interactions” (35). When taking into consideration how prominent online communication is in contemporary society:

It will become evident that communications technologies, especially the Internet, provide the setting for such folkloric emergence and transmission...[and] the main difference between the Internet as a setting for social interaction and a more concrete location in the “real world” is the speed at which information can be located and socially exchanged. (McNeill 83)

Wattpad, then, is a space in which folklore can be created because it is a space that facilitates natural communication amongst individuals—especially communication regarding stories and folktales.

Lynne McNeill furthers this discussion by arguing that “distinguishing these virtual spaces from ‘real life’ is actually inaccurate—they are real life to the people who use them” (84). This is possible because online spaces have as much impact on human lives as do physical spaces. The physical world and the digital world are not mutually exclusive. As McNeill notes, “it is completely natural that folklore would emerge in these social contexts... [as it] emerges anywhere where informal, everyday, face-to-face social interaction takes place” (84). Thus, the creation of online folklore is inevitable, as “folklore lives and adapts to the people, places, and times in which it is performed” (Kononenko 604).

Published scholarship regarding online folkloric content first started appearing around the year 2000. In these last two decades, folklorists have greatly expanded this discourse. For instance, Elif Shafak’s work addresses how one’s presence online might be further explained or characterized. She notes that “the duality between the public persona and the private self is a duality forged by the false assumption that the Self is a monolithic—at least a consistent—whole” (40). In other words, Shafak asserts the idea that “the Self” (each individual’s assertion of who they are) consists of many working parts—parts that are influenced by the social contexts that are designated by a person’s society or community. A public persona in an online space, like those seen on Wattpad, is not a persona that is separate from an individual’s true sense of identity or self. Instead, public personas—especially in online spaces—serve to display a more intricate, precise, and documentable aspect of orality, literacy, and communication in

relation to folklore. Therefore, the online profiles that are seen on online storytelling platforms are true representations of their respective users' identities.

Shafak further elaborates on this concept by noting that “social media has also opened up new possibilities for” people to communicate and express themselves—people who might have been “shunned from the public space” in other settings (41). In other words, there are spaces on the Internet that caters to all individuals of all different backgrounds. There is, essentially, a space for everyone to successfully communicate their ideas to others on the Internet. For those that are online, “the Internet offers a new zone of existence” that individuals may have never experienced before (Shafak 41). The point that Shafak makes, then, is that online spaces are just as intricate, complex, and important as non-online spaces. And, in terms of representation, online spaces are also just as indicative of a person's true identity as non-online spaces are considered to be—especially because the Internet gives individuals a new avenue to express their true thoughts and opinions.

Implied here is a connection between identity and authorship as it pertains to folklore. Originally, scholarship regarding traditional (word-of-mouth) folklore did not place such significance on the authorship of the individuals sharing folktales. Instead, it placed significance on just the folktales themselves. Such a focus can be seen in early discussions of folklore. For example, in the 1950s, scholars' definitions of folklore were focused on anthropology—asserting the idea that folktales have the potential to reveal information about the societies that created them. During this time, folklorists

considered folklore to be only a reflection of culture—leaning more towards looking at the collective whole instead of at each individual who helped create that collective.

William Bascom, a folklorist during the 1950s, further contextualizes this claim. According to Bascom, “the extent to which folklore is a mirror of culture has been mainly the concern of anthropologists, but when stated conversely it becomes the concern of all folklorists: the folklore of a people can be fully understood only through a thorough knowledge of their culture” (338). Bascom explains that there is a “basic paradox of folklore... [one that] plays a vital role in transmitting and maintaining the institutions of a culture and in forcing the individual to conform to them” (349). This basic paradox of folklore also provides “socially approved outlets for the repressions which these same institutions impose upon” individuals (Bascom 349). Thus, according to Bascom, folktales can serve to encourage individuals to simultaneously conform and/or rebel against their status quo. Such an understanding of folklore speaks only to the power of the folktales themselves and does not take into consideration the nuances of the individuals transmitting the folktales.

While Bascom’s work was integral in creating the foundation of folkloric studies, it is mentioned here because his conceptualization of folklore does not place value on the authorship or identities of the storytellers sharing the folktales he studied. Instead, it places value solely on the folktales themselves—looking to them to make assumptions of their storytellers’ culture as a collective whole. Individuality, in Bascom’s case, is not necessarily relevant to his understanding of folklore. However,

because folklore and its processes can now be documented online, modern-day folklorists, such as Dan Ben-Amos, challenge these traditional conceptions of folklore.

In Ben-Amos' recent publication, "Toward A Definition of Folklore in Context", he argues that "implicit in these [previous] definitions are criteria of the antiquity of the material, the anonymity or collectiveness of composition, and the simplicity of the folk, all of which are circumstantial and not essential to folklore" (23). In other words, previous definitions of folklore do not, will not, or cannot encompass more modern and contemporary contributions to folkloric content. This is because they are hyper focused on the history of folklore rather than current contributions to folklore. When a folklorist is able to interact with contemporary additions to folklore, it allows them to focus more directly on the authors of folktales themselves. Allotting some of that focus to the authors is the crux of properly documenting and discussing online folklore within archival spaces on the Internet.

Identity, Authorship, Fandom, and Remix Within Online Folklore

This project asserts that, in a modern-day and digital context, the identities of users in online spaces have started to play a more important role regarding individuals' creative contributions to folklore. In online spaces, where the interactions of users are documented precisely, the identities of folkloric storytellers and transmitters will not be forgotten by their future audiences. Instead, those future audiences will likely interact frequently with an author's online profile. Therefore, creating an online identity, as it pertains to authorship, now has the potential to be intricately tied to the creative process of online folklore.

Before the implementation of the online archive—or of the Internet in general—many folklorists did not put much value in the authors of folktales themselves, as accurately identifying those individuals was not always feasible in the past. For example, Simon Bronner argued that “folklore is autobiographical ethnography—that is, it is a people’s own description of themselves” (Bronner, “Folklore”, 55). His specific use of the term “ethnography” is important in understanding how little the authors of folktales have been considered in the past, as the term ethnography refers to a group of people and their culture as a whole. By describing folklore as a type of ethnography, considering an individual author and their own direct contributions to a folktale becomes irrelevant. However, we now live in an age with developments in new media that allow us to directly document and examine the contributions of a folktale’s author(s)—and their authorship—to the storytelling process. Wattpad’s online archive not only documents those authors and their interactions with their readers, but it also allows folklorists to follow the impact of their authorship as it grows and develops over time.

Essentially, creating online folklore is cyclical. A user’s online identity can influence the folktales they create because their online identity is tied to their authorship. And, in turn, those folktales and the archival spaces they are housed in will influence the identities of future users as they incorporate those folktales into their daily (online) lives. As Ben-Amos notes, “in its cultural context, folklore is not an aggregate of things, but a process—a communicative process, to be exact” (29-30). This communicative process in relation to online folklore can now be equated, to some

degree, to authorship because of new media. According to Ian Brodie, the “issue of provenance or authorship is often moot” regarding the folkloric content of the past (234). However, in our modern context, authorship is now more important in online folklore because users can, and will, look to the identities of online storytellers to determine how they should react to the folktales they are consuming and sharing in our new media age. The existence of Wattpad and its online archive has the potential to permanently alter the manner in which authorship is connected with folklore because its interface gives authors a platform to be documented and remembered, which is something that has not been done so efficiently in the past.

Russel Frank gives an early example of this type of online folklore taking place. He argues that fake news and its transmission is a contemporary form of online folklore. Frank asserts that “some fake news is folklore. It would then follow that the folkloric fake news that is created on and transmitted via computers—which is most of it—is a genre of digital folklore” (315). Frank notes that “as digital folklore, fake news is a story generated in a non-professional social context that uses the style of news either to parody that style, satirize issues and personalities in the news, or perpetrate a hoax or prank” (Frank 317). Though fake news directly discusses more real-world issues than other fictions, those fake news stories can become folkloric because they are spread and treated in much the same way as folktales. It is sometimes the online identities of the users creating these stories (and other times credible organizations or sources, as well) that make their fake news so believable, as they identify themselves as credible references of information.

Because online folklore, like fake news, exists within the Internet, the amount of exposure this content receives online is significant. Users nationwide, and even worldwide, can view a folktale and then communicate with others about its content in almost an instant. Because the nature of this communication happens on such a massive scale, users typically create and participate in fandoms and fan cultures based on the folktales themselves. In an online space that eradicates geographical and cultural barriers, perhaps it is safe to say that one of the most common foundational elements of an online community is the topic, film, music, folktale, etc. that brought those users together, as “it is not the life history of the text that determines its folkloristic quality but its present mode of existence” (Ben-Amos 35). The establishment of many online communities, then, are likely rooted in elements of fandom and fan practices because “the materials of folklore are mobile, manipulative, and transcultural” (Ben-Amos 24).

Once a folktale becomes popular, it begins to develop a fanbase. Sometimes, those fanbases grow quite large, which also grows the folktale itself. With so much folklore and interaction happening on the Internet, fandom is now inextricably tied to folklore. Additionally, though fandoms usually exist in relation to commercialized texts, that does not mean that *all* fandoms are derived from a commercialized work. While fandom does owe much of its origins to commercialization, the nature of fandom—and an individual’s experiences with participating in fandom—have evolved to also include noncommercialized works. Essentially, mass culture within the Internet has made the emergence of a fandom possible for any given text or source material.

Participating in fandom, which the Internet allows to happen on a very large scale, is now part of the cyclical nature of online folklore. Folkloric authors' identities can partially influence the content they create; which can impact the response other users have to their content; which, in turn, can influence those users' own online identities; which, lastly, can determine what type of response they will have regarding a text, setting the precedent for the fandom that each text creates. Gray et al. also notes that "because fandom has become an increasingly important identity resource in a world that has undergone profound [media] transformations...being a fan may be as important to one's community memberships as one's sense of self" (11). Because being a fan can be so impactful to a user's online experiences, texts with larger fandoms will facilitate more user interaction, discussion, and community amongst users. Spaces, like Wattpad, in which these elements are happening more frequently will, in turn, have more opportunities to generate new folkloric content.

Additionally, it is also important to note that remix is often a tool that is used by creators and authors when they are creating new content for their fandom. This implies the presence of remix within new online folklore—at least to some degree. For example, users have the choice to replicate the work(s) they are interacting with exactly as is. While some users do just that, others tend to choose to elaborate on those works or communications by adding their own perspectives, experiences, and ideas to them. The process of doing so is typically connected to remix, as an individual is essentially 'remixing' a work's narratological elements with their own additions.

According to Steven Hetcher, “remix works are created by taking digital snippets from various sources and combining them to create a new work” (1872). In essence, the process of remixing a work into something new functions quite the same as traditional (word-of-mouth) folklore, especially since contemporary “technological advances make it easier for fanworks [*sic*] and remix to draw much more comprehensively from underlying sources” (Hetcher 1874). Essentially, an individual takes the content they have learned from someone else, edits it to encompass new elements, and passes it along to the next person. The degree to which an individual, or user, changes a text typically varies. Hetcher explains that “some fan fiction and remix draw heavily from the underlying works, either quantitatively or qualitatively (or both), while other works draw relatively little from the underlying works and add much that is creative and original” (1908-1909).

According to Henry Jenkins, “today, shared cultural references are increasingly coming from popular culture, and the practices of appropriation and remixing involved in deploying those stories borrow fan practices” (100). Thus, it is remix that allows users to create new content for the archive based on old content within the archive.

Andrew Peck elaborates on the nature of this type of online interaction (or communication) by explaining how it mimics and differs from traditional (word-of-mouth) communication:

(1) by occurring asynchronously; (2) by encouraging imitation and personalization while also allowing perfect replication; (3) by combining elements of oral, written, and visual communication; and (4) by generating shared expectations for performance that enact group identity despite the lack of a physically present group. (334)

The nature of online communication, especially within spaces that are created to foster it, creates a folkloric cycle of interaction. Users create online identities that may be used to help elevate their authorship. Those identities can then go on to influence the responses that other users have regarding their work. Those responses can then impact how those users create or alter their own identities, which then changes the nuances of their fandom. And, lastly, those elements of fandom will impact how users remix archival works into something new—which typically serves as the foundation for new online folklore.

It is precisely online archival spaces, like Wattpad and *Fanfiction.net*, that allow scholars to witness the cyclical nature of online folklore taking place firsthand. Granted, the speed at which this cycle takes place may vary greatly—typically depending on a work’s tendency to gain traction, which can be unpredictable at the best of times. However, the cyclical nature of online folklore will continue to happen, especially because “digital communication facilitates everyday performance, narration, and storytelling” (Peck 334). Without an understanding of online identity, authorship, fandom, and remix, the presence of online folklore would be much harder to discern, document, and identify within online storytelling platforms.

Diving Deeper into Fandom

Because the implementation and utilization of fandom is so important to Wattpad’s users, their works, and communications, it is relevant to further elaborate on its more nuanced functions—those that impact Wattpad users’ fan culture and remix. Essentially, Wattpad utilizes fandom to grow the size of, participation in, and

output of its online presence and community. Fully contextualizing fandom as it exists on Wattpad will help to more thoroughly explain how its interface fosters community and interaction—and subsequently its users’ online identities.

Perhaps one of the more overt characteristics of fandom within Wattpad is its dedication in maintaining a welcoming nature. By prioritizing the necessity of “providing a safe community, Wattpad allows users to feel that they are part of public life and contributing to a wider conversation” (Davies 61). The contexts of all interactions within Wattpad, which includes the creation of new online folklore, are founded in—or originate from—this precedent. Because “fanfiction is also written largely for a readership comprised of fans of the original work who share that emotional connection with the original story,” making sure these spaces remain inclusive is very important in maintaining their success (Lipton 437). If the perceived openness of a fandom, within any of Wattpad’s archival spaces, is threatened, that space as a community will not be as effective as its welcoming counterparts.

Because Wattpad puts emphasis on maintaining positive and successful fandoms within its archive, encouraging its users to join a community of fans helps to create feelings of belonging within them. When users feel like they belong in Wattpad’s archival space—or when users have their needs heard and met by other users—individuals have more incentive to interact with one another and to create new content for the online archive.

Karen Hellekson gives an example of this process happening on Wattpad. She notes in her scholarship that “the teen girls on Wattpad exchanging One Direction fan

fiction [for example] are making use of the platform to construct their fandom and create a fannish [*sic*] community” (Hellekson 131). Additionally, it is because these users feel included and welcomed that they can utilize Wattpad so successfully. If Wattpad’s online spaces were not safe places for users to express their identities and thoughts freely, then users would not feel like their participation in its functions is contributing to a wider conversation within their public life.

This wider conversation might also be known as mass culture. According to Daniela Koceva and Snezana Mirascieva, a definition of mass culture is centered around its participants: “the mass media audience is a collective characterized by a common field of interest, behavior and activities aimed at common goals” (61). Because spaces like Wattpad put so much emphasis on fostering communities founded in fandom, the presence of mass culture within these spaces is also inevitable because the common interests its users share are so strong. For instance, mass culture may manifest in any type of large-scale community—especially politically, socially, or folklorically—because those points of discussion resonate so strongly with so many individuals across the world. In essence, mass culture serves as the foundation for fandom because it is the proverbial glue that holds fandom communities together.

In fact, a look at Richard Hoggart’s foundational discussion of mass culture explains that looking at “mass media and at other elements in mass culture not only helps broaden our understanding of mass society, but affects our views on traditional culture as well” (452). Mass culture, then, serves to influence the folklore that these communities are creating both online and by word-of-mouth. Such is the case because

it is mass culture that facilitates the transmittance of, and interaction with, folktales between individuals—at least in a contemporary context.

According to Hellekson, who expands on this concept, “fan activity remains a search for community, a way to unabashedly love something, a desire to engage critically but also viscerally, and a mode of personal expression unlike any other, as it permits engagement through manipulation of mass culture” (125). Mass culture helps to characterize a community with the concepts of discourse and self-expression—a characterization that is needed in all spaces that facilitate the creation and perpetuation of folktales.

With Wattpad’s online archive having a stronghold in a digital means of communication, its stories and forum-like discussions often garner quite a lot of user traffic. When thousands of Internet users can meet and communicate in the same online space, the presence of mass culture within that space is inevitable—especially if that space facilitates the presence of fandom. Mass culture is possible when large quantities of people can access and discuss the same information all at once. Because archival information is so easily accessible, communication involving such information is frequent, consistent, and constantly evolving. Mass media (culture), then, happens when a large number of people have access to a specific series of texts, videos, and forums in a space that fosters discourse regarding that information.

Wattpad is a successful medium of online folklore because it puts significant emphasis on maintaining its public spaces—or, its archive. In addition to incorporating elements of “older expressions of folklore, the internet has also given birth to both

radically changed and entirely new modes of discourse” (Debies and Jeffrey 34-35). As a standard, its users form communities based on certain tags, texts, or sometimes even genres. Sharing a preference for a specific type of story is typically the purpose of joining a community on Wattpad. Because Wattpad’s public spaces are centered around stories, its community members participate in fandom by design. According to Trevor Blank, “folk groups are readily identifiable on the Internet, as evidenced by chat forums, blogs, online political activity, fan web pages, and a plethora of other interrelated concepts” (9). The communities that are on Wattpad have the potential to encompass all these qualities—sometimes even all at once.

According to Liisi Laineste, for instance, “folkloric communication flourishes in the virtual arena when emotional topics are being discussed. Grand narratives—such as ideas about identity and nationality—surge; myths and folk beliefs are reintroduced” (124). In providing a space in which almost all types of communication may take place over any topic, the sheer amount of participation it generates from users across the globe is practically unfathomable. Considering “the internet has become a vigorous medium for all kinds of interaction, including the folkloric,” its text-based means of communication is altering the very ways in which we interact with one another (Laineste 108). With the Internet, we can create text, video, audio, and images for a global audience. That same audience then has the power to replicate that text or communication precisely to share it with others. Before the Internet, such an intricate, precise, and instantaneous means of communicating and interacting with others did not exist.

While orality and literacy inspire spaces such as Wattpad's archive, it is fandom and mass culture that inspires users to continue to utilize it. When a large number of people gather to participate in a shared discourse, their thoughts, ideas, stories, creativity, and folklore will merge together and form a larger, more influential narrative. Such a narrative has the potential to foster an entirely new type of folklore—online folklore. As Hoggart asserted in the 1970s, even before the establishment of the Internet, mass culture creates “a rich and provocative field to be explored in the interplay between ideas on character, relationships, setting, and the nature of the dramatic within literary criticism and sociological literature on symbolic interaction, role-playing, and the definition of the situation” (456). Mediums of mass culture, like Wattpad, allow researchers to examine these functions as they are happening while also serving as a database for that information.

Characterizing the Wattpad Website

Wattpad, “founded in 2006,” has grown significantly since its creation almost two decades ago (Hellekson 128). The website self-reports that “what was once a handful of readers is now a vibrant community of millions who spend a collective 23 billion minutes on Wattpad every month” (“About”). As of 2021, Wattpad housed roughly “80 million users” and now, in 2022, Wattpad itself reports that it currently houses “90 million readers and writers in over 50 languages,” though the latter statistics have not been corroborated by an outside source (Falguera-García 4; “About”). Regardless, with such a large number of users, Wattpad caters to a culturally and socially diverse audience “with more than 30 million stories” available to readers

worldwide for free, which makes “Wattpad...the biggest database of user-generated fiction” (Pianzola 33). Because of its popularity, Pianzola argues that “we have to acknowledge that Wattpad readers are the generation of new readers. A generation who is nurturing a passion for reading being immersed in the use of digital media” (39).

With such a massive membership base, Wattpad is quickly becoming a significant medium for folkloric content, as it is a space that allows for the publication and archiving of stories—stories written by authors all over the world. Because “Wattpad is mainly a community of readers and emerging authors who can read and publish texts via website or mobile app,” these stories are not edited by major publishing companies (Pianzola 4). Therefore, the texts on Wattpad do not have to adhere to any type of technical or social rules and are free to be whatever their authors want them to be. For example, Wattpad encourages this ideology in its users, using the following tag line to inspire users to create in a folkloric manner: “stories. They’re not static. They’re living. Breathing. They change and they can change you” (“About”). With this self-promoting statement, Wattpad is asserting that its users are responsible for the creation of new content and encourages them to join its communities to evolve the content within them.

Because online folklore is created within digital media, it is important to look towards Wattpad’s interface to examine exactly how its structure allows users to communicate, create, and share their works. The means in which Wattpad’s interface is established contribute to its success as a storytelling platform. Essentially, Wattpad

is a space that provides a foundation for storytellers—and subsequently folklore—by literal design. Wattpad’s interface works to ensure that users are focused on consuming stories, sharing their own works, and creating communities that are centered on each specific work. In doing so, Wattpad’s online space is one that allows individuals to expand their daily experiences into an online, worldwide community. Wattpad’s success at fostering storytelling and interaction amongst its users has established the website as a current, and significant, contributor to the field of folklore.

The sole purpose of the online communities that Wattpad facilitates is to engage its users to create a discourse that inspires the creation of new stories, which inspire newer stories and so on. Within Wattpad, a community begins with each individual user—allowing them to create their own customizable profiles. After a user joins Wattpad, they begin the journey of building their online identity. When interacting with others (by commenting or creating their own stories), a user’s profile gains the potential to impact how they and their content are received by other users.

As Wattpad users begin to interact with one another, they are able to leave digital traces of their communications—which impacts the manner in which stories and communities are interacted with. For example, Wattpad showcases a work’s statistics via votes (the equivalent of clicking a ‘like’ button), the number of reads it has, the number of comments it has, and so on. In displaying such information, Wattpad allows users that are browsing the archive to instantaneously know which stories are fostering larger communities. Users may then use that information to

decide which communities they would like to join and which texts they would like to consume.

When joining Wattpad as one of its online users, an individual gains the ability to establish a massive web of online connections with a potentially endless number of people from across the world. When so many individuals gather in the same space for the sole purpose of sharing stories and creating fandoms, the folklore they will inevitably create and transmit has the potential to exceed all geographical and cultural barriers—though published content may still be subjected to the language barriers of their respective authors and their resources (to acquire a translator). Additionally, Rosamund Davies explains that:

Once a Wattpad story has gained a certain number of reads and votes and the writer has thousands of followers, he or she is no longer operating in a social network of direct reciprocity but has established a public reputation as an exceptional Wattpader, evident to Wattpad members who have never interacted with the writer or his or her work. (59)

Users who attain a high status within Wattpad have done so via their storytelling abilities and online identity. This same dynamic of identity and quality resulting in popularity is an element of traditional (word-of-mouth) folklore that has manifested in online spaces. In a traditional (pre-digital) setting, such statistical information about an individual might have been gleaned by general conversation. Spaces like Wattpad, however, allow users to bypass that step and gain that same information immediately—thus facilitating an even quicker rate of interaction amongst its users.

An even more intricate level of communication also takes place on Wattpad within the comment sections that reside within each individual story. Because each

paragraph of text within a Wattpad story contains a commenting section, each paragraph a user reads has the potential to initiate a different type of forum-like discussion. Federico Pianzola conducted a study in which the nature of these type of interactions were considered and characterized—specifically on the Wattpad website.

Pianzola found that an “important aspect to underline is that Wattpad readers’ construction of identity occurs exclusively through the text of their comments, unlike face-to-face reading groups, and it is affected by the public social context” (34). A portion of the public social context is generated from the story itself—as each story serves as a type of communication piece. Additionally, to extend that level of communication, users also have the option of including images, music videos, or regular videos of other content in their chapters, giving them an additional means of outreach to their audiences. Users can see these additions at the top or beginning of every chapter and can sometimes choose to listen as they read. These multimodal elements also help to create a space for folkloric creation that incorporates the nuances of non-digital settings, as video, music, or other imagery might help to create, perpetuate, or inspire folkloric content. These elements also help to further ground the social contexts that users interact with in the physical world.

For example, the Wattpad text *Bessa* by Whiskeyqueen (see appendix A) includes a music video for the first chapter of their story. A user comment is as follows: “the writing and the music you chose to go with it is **chef’s kiss** [sic]” (Lauralcava). With this comment, this user is affirming the author’s narratological choices, ensuring they will repeat them. Additionally, this song helps to build the social context

surrounding this chapter by providing users with a real-world reference to gauge what the author is conveying in the text—essentially contributing to the emotional components of the narrative.

Pianzola goes on to note “that in many cases the emotional valence of a story has a direct effect on reader response” (37). Thus, when a user (or reader) interacts with a text on Wattpad, they are directly responding to content (and its messages) the author created. Additionally, those same users are also interacting with other users who have left their own comments. In other words, both storytellers and audience members are having meaningful conversations about the topics raised within each story on Wattpad. The nature of these user interactions places quite a lot of significance on the commenting portion of Wattpad communication. This differs from other websites that do not put much emphasis on commenting, like *Fanfiction.net* for example, which instead put emphasis on interacting with “social audience[s] directly through reviews and [direct] messages” (Lammers 283).

While I agree with Pianzola that commenting plays an integral part of identity formation on Wattpad, I must disagree that identity formation on Wattpad derives solely from commenting alone. The importance of the user profile should not be discredited in this dynamic. In addition to commenting, the social context that contributes to users’ identities is their public personas, which are established by the profiles they create for themselves. For example, those users who have achieved a celebrity-like status have a better chance of creating more expansive discourses on Wattpad, as would be the case in any traditional setting. Without their profiles, users

would not be able to achieve such status, as they would not be readily identifiable to other users.

By having the ability to visit each user's profile page, any visitor might get a sense of who that user is. Additionally, that same visitor may see how thoroughly that user interacts with the rest of the community by taking note of their Wattpad statistics. For example, does that reader consume a lot of content? Check their reading lists. If they have written anything, how much engagement has their work generated? The statistics will tell. By establishing the profile page, Wattpad has given users the means to know the public—or outward—identities that others have created for themselves. Such information quickens the communication process by allowing users to forgo introductory formalities. Instead, users can immediately begin discussing the content that is present, which in turn quickens the creation of new content—thus expediting the emergence of new folkloric content.

It is important to reiterate that it is Wattpad's interface that makes this level of folkloric interaction and communication efficient. Rebecca Black comments on the significance of a website's interface by noting that "as the content organization influences people's interactions in and responses to a space...individuals' interactions and reactions in turn may shape the subsequent content organization" (387). This process is typically a quick one because online spaces "allow products, perspectives, and information to be disseminated across time and space in an instant" (Black 386). Ultimately, online spaces—and especially Wattpad—are designed to allow "users to create, shape, and reshape the site and its content" (Black 387). Thus, Wattpad's

design and layout was created specifically to allow its users to evolve its content. It is through Wattpad's interface that users are able to build their identities and communicate with one another.

The Basics: Wattpad's Interface and Design

When users join Wattpad, there are three main pages within the website that they will navigate most often. Those pages are the homepage, browsing page, and the profile page. The following discussion will explain the design of these three pages to further contextualize a Wattpad user's experience once joining the website. The designs of these three pages are structured to guide a user to Wattpad's stories and communities—all the while encouraging them to join a conversation and create their own content. These three foundational pages are where the first step of content creation begins within Wattpad users, making their designs integral to the creating process.

When users first arrive on Wattpad's website, they are met with the homepage. There, Wattpad has taglines and bits of information that touts its success and influence. These tag lines begin to urge the user to explore Wattpad's archive. For example, one such tagline reads: Wattpad "connects a global community of 90 million readers and writers through the power of story" (Wattpad). With this tagline, Wattpad is asserting the size and diversity of its archive, while at the same time urging its users to connect with other users—either by exploring their stories or by creating their own content.

Additionally, the main tabs of information the homepage offers allows the viewer to select from the following options: “Start Reading,” “Start Writing,” “Browse,” “Writer Opportunities,” and “Community” (Wattpad). These limited options push a user to partake in sharing, community, creativity, and consumption, which are all qualities Wattpad utilizes to facilitate storytelling and communication amongst its users (see figure 1). With those specific portals, Wattpad sets the tone for the nature of their users’ participation on their website.

The “Start Reading” and “Start Writing” options direct the user to create an account or sign into an account they might already have before taking them to pages that will satisfy their respective needs. The “Browse” button offers users the option to choose which genre they would like to explore. The “Writer Opportunities” tab allows the user to choose from the following options: “Writer Resources,” “Writer Programs,” and “Writer Contests” (Wattpad). These links take users to pages that have additional tag lines like the following: “your story matters. Let the world hear it”; “cultivate your fanbase”; and “find your people” (“Writers”).

These tag lines are also pushing users to get involved with the creating process and to interact with their peers. The “Community” tab offers users opportunities to learn more about “The Wattys” (which is a writing contest hosted by Wattpad each year), “Community Happenings,” and “Wattpad Ambassadors” (Wattpad).

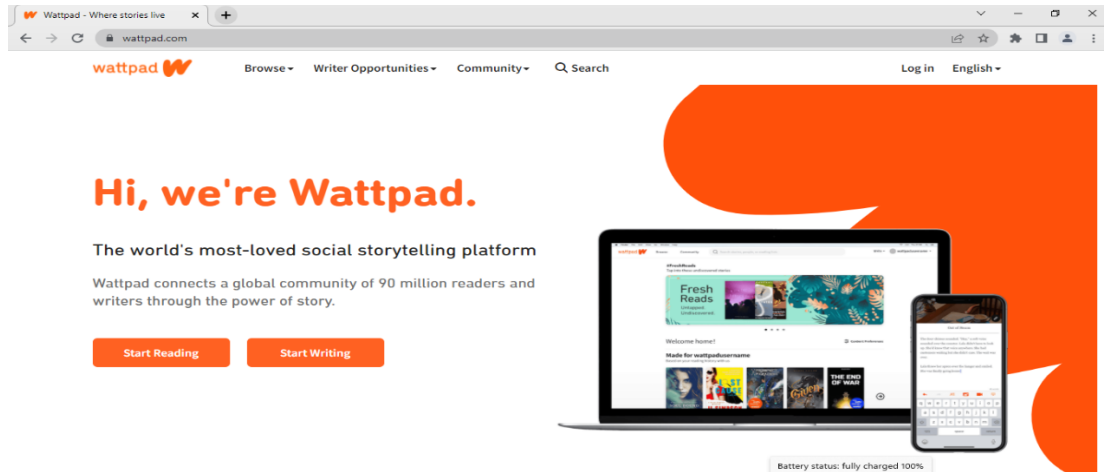


Figure 1. Wattpad Homepage View Without a User Profile

This option provides ways in which a user might further participate in Wattpad's online communities. The design of Wattpad's homepage, then, is structured to elicit a significant level of participation from Wattpad users. The content on the homepage is very straightforward and to the point, leading users to portals that will have them consume stories, create stories, or communicate with other readers about stories. In such a space, the creation of folkloric content is practically inevitable. Such is the case because every aspect of user participation and interaction on Wattpad is premised with the assertion, or assumption, that the purpose of a user's actions is to provide contributions to the creation, discussion, and perpetuation of stories. Thus, Wattpad's setup of the homepage alerts a user of their purpose on Wattpad, which is to engage in folkloric behavior—quite literally by design.

The browsing page, which sees a significant amount of user traffic, is structured with a simple format to ensure maximum ease for users when searching for new content. For all genres, the browsing page remains the same. At the top of the browsing page (see figure 2), are Wattpad's suggestions for the "Hottest Paid Stories."

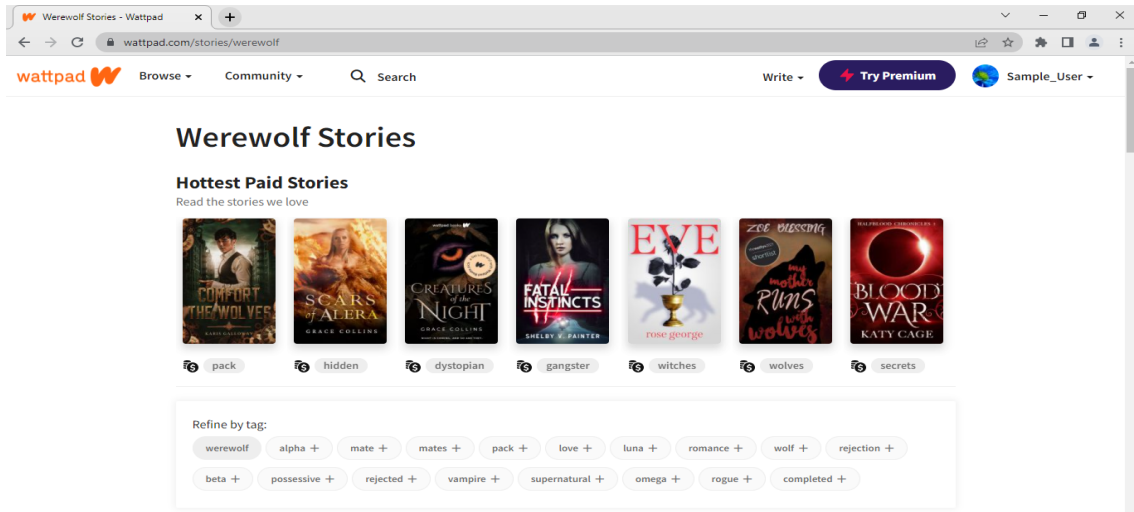


Figure 2. Initial Story Searching on the Wattpad Browsing Page Using the Werewolf Genre as an Example

Wattpad’s Hottest Paid Stories are stories that users must pay to read, and are categorized by different tags that describe the stories’ content. Wattpad’s paid stories will be further explained in the following section. They are mentioned now to give context to Wattpad’s interface.

From there, a user has the option to refine their browsing experience by selecting a tag or series of tags that best suit their needs. This area of the browsing page is designated as the “refine by tag” area and offers options such as “werewolf,” “alpha,” “mate,” “possessive,” and so on (“Werewolf”). If a user wishes to read free stories instead, they must scroll below this option.

Beneath the “refine by tag” area is a list of the top, most currently popular stories that are in the genre (see figure 3). Each of these stories has a few tags displayed by their titles along with a partial synopsis. To see all the information about a text, a user must click on the specific story they are interested in. In addition to this

design and layout, it is important to showcase the identifying statistics Wattpad also includes with each text that is displayed (see figure 3). Mentioning this information is integral in properly characterizing the context in which folkloric content is created on Wattpad.

Part of what makes possible a Wattpad user's navigation of, and contribution to, Wattpad's archive is the statistical information it consistently gives them. Because the displayed statistics are so integral to a Wattpad user's navigation of stories on the website, it is important to understand how using them might impact a user's decisions.

When browsing a list of werewolf stories, for example, a user can use this information to discern which stories are popular, current, and relevant to their needs. Access to this kind of information allows a user to quickly determine which conversations are significant and lively and which are less relevant to the current community discourse.

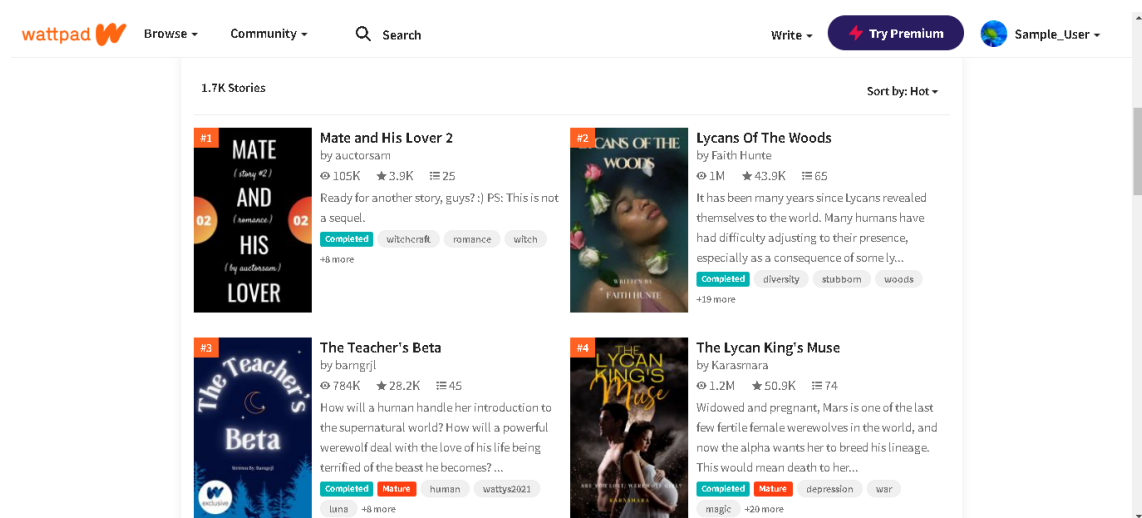


Figure 3. Browsing the Free Stories on Wattpad

Traditionally, this type of information is something that is typically determined via word of mouth. Displaying these statistics allows users to move from one point of discussion to another rather seamlessly—essentially quickening the pace of finding content, interacting with it, and potentially being inspired by it.

Because all users on Wattpad are given this type of statistical information (number of reads, number of votes, and how many chapters a text contains) about practically every text they interact with, the ways users create and interact with new and current material are undoubtedly altered. Additional information includes relevant tags, a maturity rating, and a completed or ongoing status for the story. When choosing, reading, and potentially deriving inspiration from a story on Wattpad, these social context clues help them understand what community, discourse, and topic they are contributing to. Fully understanding this social context contributes to a user's desire to maintain their presence on Wattpad. Additionally, it is Wattpad's interface that fosters the success of these user interactions.

The simplicity and effectiveness of Wattpad's design also translates to the profile page and the profile making process. While a user may spend their time joining communities and interacting with other users' works, they will likely have established themselves via their profile page before doing so. As a user is creating their Wattpad profile page, they are prompted to respond to a series of questions that allows them to express their identities and preferences. These questions help the user to feel that their voices are being heard and that their likes and dislikes are being respected.

Even further, the line of questioning (see figure 4) creates a sense of belonging in the Wattpad community for new users. This sense of belonging is established by introducing them into the Wattpad community in a manner that directs them to an appropriate niche they might best fit into. And, to better establish this dynamic, a user is taken to an updated version of the homepage—one that is more personalized to their needs—after they have finished creating their profiles (See figure 5).

Thus, a user’s first interaction with Wattpad is one that reminds them of the profile that they have created, making them more aware of its importance. After users have access to the updated homepage, they may customize a profile page. The profile page allows users to: create a fun username, receive a personalized handle for public discourse, write an autobiography on their own About page, to see a user’s public conversations via their handle, and for others to see the profiles a user is following.

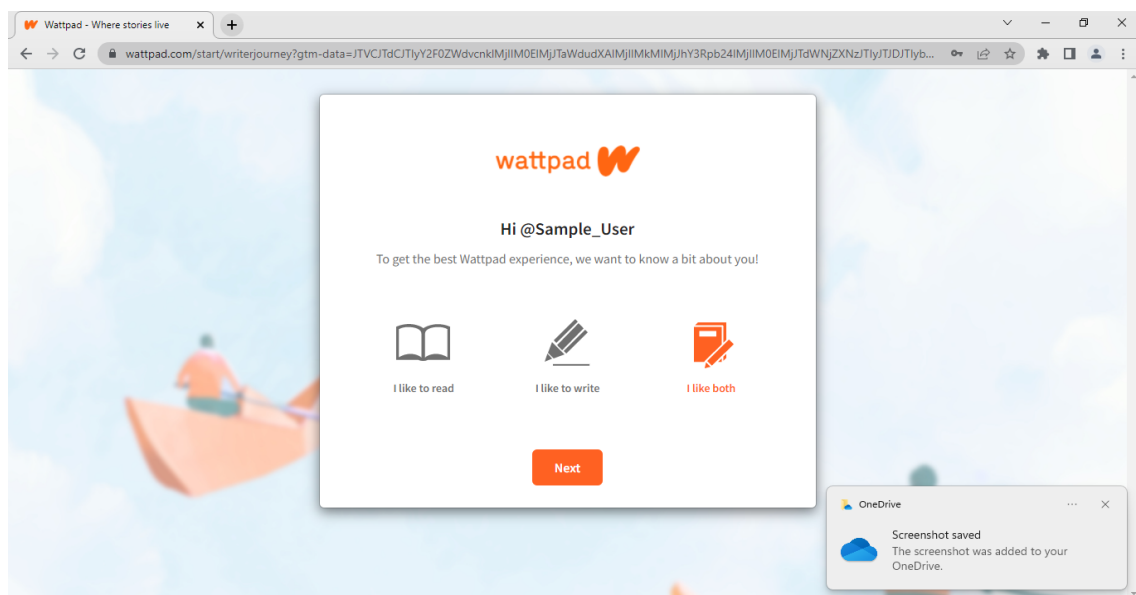


Figure 4. User Prompt for Creating Wattpad Profile

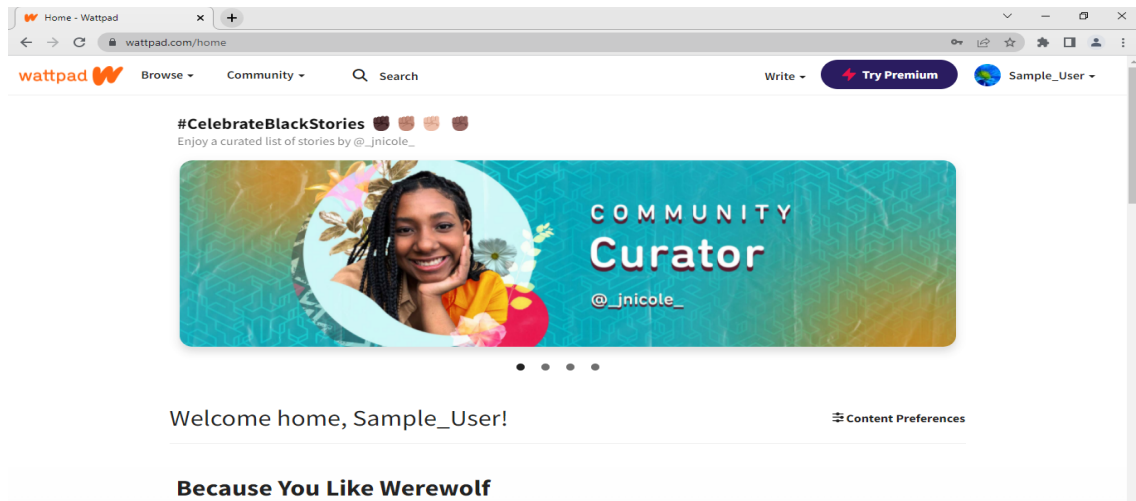


Figure 5. Wattpad Homepage with a User Profile

The profile page also allows users to create reading lists of their favorite stories and gives them the option to make those lists public or private, depending on if they would like other users to see those lists when visiting their profile page. Users are also able to add other users' stories to their own personal libraries, which must remain private. This page also provides users with an opportunity to directly message each other. If a user has public published work, users will be able to see those works when they visit an author's profile. Note that users are not able to see written work on the profiles of other users that is not marked public or published.

The design/layout and function of the Wattpad profile page allows users to create an online identity for themselves. Users are free to discuss any topics they might want; publish any type of content they might desire (anonymously or publicly); read about a seemingly unlimited plethora of content written by anyone in the world; and use the space their profile provides to critique, contribute to, or get inspiration from the written work of others.

Contextual Information: The Nuances of Navigating Wattpad

Wattpad's interface is, by design, a successful online space in which to join communities, converse, and share stories—a space that fosters folkloric creation. While the basics of Wattpad's interface have been explained, it is important to further contextualize a Wattpad user's experiences while using the website. Doing so will allow one to further understand how the information Wattpad provides users might influence their online behavior. The nuances of a Wattpad user's experience are what make Wattpad an integral part of the discussion regarding online folklore—in addition to other online spaces.

For example, how are Wattpad stories published? How does Wattpad's tagging system work? What is the significance of voting for a story? How might the Paid Stories program impact a user's Wattpad experience? It is important to discuss the answers to these questions because these nuances will explain what makes Wattpad a significant online space.

To begin with, the stories on Wattpad are typically published serially—in chapters or major sections that must be accessed individually. Authors have the option to publish these sections as they are created or to publish all sections at once after the entire text has been written. Many authors on Wattpad typically partake in the former. This provides users with the opportunity to discuss sections of a text amongst themselves and with the author(s) while new content is being written. Because of this, Wattpad users are oftentimes presented with the ability to directly influence the content within a text as it is being created.

For example, the Wattpad story *Lexi's Promise* by neverfakeit (see appendix A) includes a note from the author to their readers. This note is a direct example of the level of influence their audience members have on their work:

This book came into being because of my Wattpad readers, who pleaded for more even after the lovebirds pledged their eternal devotion to each other...I incorporated reader suggestions into some of the plot points...as always, your input is my writer's fuel. Please leave comments along the way, so I know where I went wrong or where I went right. (neverfakeit pars. 1-2)

After reading this note, it becomes apparent that not only is this author listening to their audience members, but they are also directly conversing with them. This author's note, then, is an example of the building of community that is possible on Wattpad.

Such a space allows for more community discussions to take place regarding these stories, which is much like the functions taking place when discussing or sharing folktales in non-digital communities. The developmental status of each story on Wattpad is always immediately displayed, indicated as either "Ongoing" or "Completed." This function allows users to identify the context in which they will be interacting with a text. For example, if a text is in the process of being completed, a user might read what is written thus far, comment their opinion or reaction to that content, and the author may decide to change the narrative of their story to incorporate the suggestions of that comment. If a text is completed, a user might decide they want to read it to participate in a discussion that has already been established and explored. Because users can see the progress of Wattpad's texts, they are able to decide how they will interact with their peers and their respective stories.

This designation of progress also mimics the transmittance of traditional (word-of-mouth) folklore because it replicates the social context in which folktales are told. For example, there are newer folktales (and even some older ones) that are in the process of being created or evolved, which fosters discussions of creativity and constructive criticism. However, there are folktales that are very old or well established that may not need much changing—which might limit the nature of the discussions regarding those folktales. Thus, including this information in Wattpad’s website design is integral in creating a folkloric space.

Additionally, a Wattpad story’s cover is another tidbit of information that its users are immediately presented with while browsing the archive. These covers, just like any other story that contains a cover, can influence a user’s interest in a text. All texts on Wattpad may have a cover, which is typically left to the author of the text to customize. When writing a story, Wattpad provides its users with the option to edit their story’s cover. Clicking the edit option will take them to an editing program that allows them to customize their own Wattpad story cover from a series of templates created by Wattpad. Users may get as creative in their customization as they like. Users who do not wish to make a cover may recruit another user to create one for them or can opt to not include a cover at all, in which case Wattpad will substitute the cover image with a generic design. The means in which users obtain a cover for their works is the same for both Paid Stories and non-paid stories. Considering that a majority of Wattpad story covers are derived from Wattpad’s own templates, they are designed to pique a user’s interest.

Before continuing this conversation, it is also relevant to quickly characterize the nature of the content that Wattpad is publishing. Considering the heavy influence of fandom on Wattpad's users, one might think that Wattpad is a fanfiction archive. However, while fanfiction does exist on Wattpad, it houses many other types of texts. In essence, Wattpad creates an online space that encompasses more than just fanfiction; users can create poetry, forums, anthologies, fiction, nonfiction, and even commercialized works within its archive. And, at times, Wattpad users can create their own fandoms based on a version of a folkloric image that has evolved on the Wattpad platform itself. Where similar websites might base their archives solely on fanfiction-related content outside of the archive (such as the *Star Trek* franchise, for example), as AO3 does, Wattpad users have started to create texts based on content that originated *within* the website, or archive.

Take Gem002_'s comment on a Wattpad story, for example. For context, they are responding to the characterization of the main male protagonist in *Hired to Love* by JordanLynde on Wattpad (see appendix A). They write, "wow...[sic] how original for a wattpad [sic] guy [here, they also include an emoji that is rolling its eyes]" (Gem002_). This comment implies that there is a common, and specific, manner in which male protagonists on Wattpad are written. Though the annoyed manner of their tone suggests they would like to read something different, the assertions they are making about how characters are written on Wattpad implies that there is possibly a trope, unique to Wattpad's archive, that its users utilize when creating their male protagonists. Therefore, this trope must originate from within Wattpad's archive, as

the criteria for a “Wattpad guy” cannot originate from anywhere other than Wattpad itself.

Additionally, it is Wattpad’s tagging system that has helped make such a method of content creation possible. Wattpad’s tagging system allows users to find the stories they might be interested in once a text has been published by grouping together those that are similar to each other. The most relevant stories are displayed after a user’s search for content. These stories receive their status via Tag Ranking, which is a process that is determined by “an algorithm that takes into account factors such as the popularity, trendiness, and user engagement of a story. This also includes the relevance of the tags used and when the story was last updated by the author” (“Tag Ranking FAQs”). So, for example, stories can be considered top ranked in the “werewolf,” “possessive,” “alpha,” etc. tag categories individually. This means that a story about werewolves might be the most popular in the “possessive” tag category while simultaneously being the fifth popular text in the “alpha” tag category. Thus, those stories ranking highest in popularity in, say, the “werewolf” tag will appear first (and in order) when that tag is used to refine a search.

Each of the ranked stories is then separated even further by other tags, which offers a user the ability to make their searches as broad or specific as they would like. The accuracy and specificity of the tags themselves are determined by each author of each individual text, as they are responsible for thinking of and creating the tags. However, authors might also choose to select a specific category or genre their work belongs in, which is a list predetermined by Wattpad, to further categorize their stories

into the appropriate spaces and communities. With the information a user might glean from a tag, they may use it to determine which story or stories they would like to read, add to a reading list, or add to their library.

Wattpad's tags give context to an author's story. Stories with tags that do not appropriately represent that context will likely not do as well as those that are assigned appropriate tags. Such is the case because "tags available on a social tagging application allow other people to access different interpretations and additional information about content available in digital formats" (Choi and Syn 1089). Learning the appropriate tags to use for their works is an aspect of storytelling for Wattpad authors that must be gleaned from interacting with their audience and other users. They must understand the nuances of the communities surrounding each category of content on Wattpad in order to effectively contribute to them. Wattpad requiring users to interact with each other so thoroughly is in part what makes Wattpad communities so interconnected and successful.

This categorization of texts via tagging is the most significant component of Wattpad's archival function. Without these tags, the content on Wattpad would be almost impossible to locate with a search unless a user was looking up texts by name or author (which is a highly unlikely occurrence). Because it is the users that determine what—and how—tags are used, they make a search for a text more specialized. When a user publishes a text on Wattpad, they must choose which Wattpad category the text belongs to so that it can be placed in the right community. This makes the text generally searchable by genre (thriller, mystery, etc.). The tags, then, are assigned by

each individual author to make the classification of their text more specific so that users may better find exactly what they are looking for. Other users, such as readers, typically do not have much influence on how a story is tagged, meaning they cannot assign tags to stories themselves. Short of commenting on a work or sending a direct message to an author to give suggestions, a reader does not have much influence in the tagging process. These user-generated tags actually function very similarly to AO3's tagging system.

For example, AO3 "users may tag their posts freely, or use pre-defined and/or canonical tags" to enhance the searchability of their text (Price and Robinson 3). Wattpad users navigate the same tagging structure. For example, a canonical tag on Wattpad might be "werewolf." Even further, "AO3 implements a combined self-tagging and automanual system. The site suggests pre-defined tags when filling them in, although taggers are free to choose whatever terms they wish" (Price and Robinson 7). Wattpad also partakes in this same type of tagging system. While users are creating their tags on Wattpad, suggestions will appear as a list to help inform the author of their usefulness. While Wattpad and AO3 differ in terms of purpose and content, the way that they tag their respective texts is very similar.

Wattpad users typically use popular tags (or combinations of tags) when describing their texts. However, it is important to note that these combinations might change or evolve at any time depending on the discourse within a Wattpad community. For example, Wattpad tags can be indicative of the type of main characters and plotlines that will occur in a given text. However, should a community

discourse change, that might not be the case in the future. The function of this tagging design is to encourage users to create and consume content that is in some way related to the content already in circulation within existing Wattpad communities. In other words, texts in the Werewolf category, for example, that are tagged with “Omega” will have common themes that are influenced by other texts with the same tag. Such a design places emphasis on becoming literate in the social contexts of the online communities themselves, which requires a user to read, create, and participate in the discussion of texts on Wattpad.

For example, this process might be observed directly by using the “werewolf” and “omega” tags on Wattpad. After having applied these tags to a search, the top four stories that appear on the browsing page have a recurring theme. Of course, all have a protagonist that is an omega in a werewolf pack—omega meaning the lowest ranking werewolf (see figure 6). However, their common theme is some variation of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse happening to the omega character, as noted by their synopses.

The following will give a brief quotation from each synopsis to showcase the similarities amongst them, which demonstrates of how each of their respective authors have adhered to the social contexts associated with the “Omega” tag. Though each synopsis is different, or discussing a different story, each of them share similar elements that surpass mere coincidence.

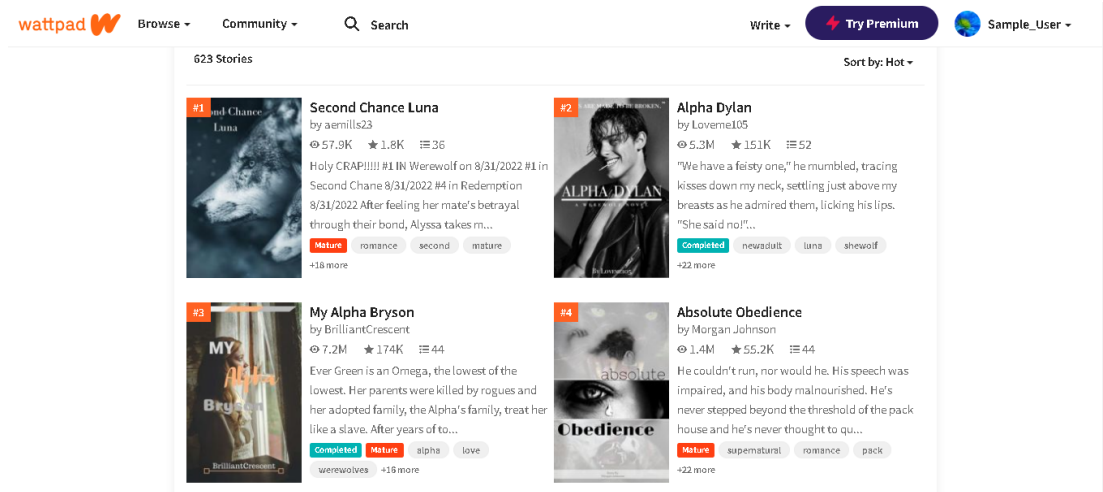


Figure 6. Tagging Example Using the "Werewolf" and "Omega" Tags

In *Alpha Dylan's* synopsis, the omega protagonist states that “suddenly, the man was ripped off of me and I gasped as he was punched” after having attempted to sexually assault her (Loveme105). Regarding the omega protagonist in the synopsis of *My Alpha Bryson*, it states that “the Alpha's family, treat her like a slave. [And] after years of torture and torment Ever decides that she has had enough and runs away” (BrilliantCrescent). And lastly, in the synopsis of *Absolute Obedience*, the omega protagonist “was brought up to be obedient, to service his Alpha and pack. The pack used him, his Alpha abused him, he was merely a toy to be played with” (Mgiannelli89). This theme of including extreme acts of abuse and violence towards an omega protagonist is not a coincidence amongst these “Omega” tagged stories—especially considering these are the tag’s most currently popular stories.

The social context of the tag “omega” within Wattpad’s community of werewolf content creators and consumers is that the consensus amongst users dictates this type of characterization for a protagonist should exist when the “omega”

tag is being used. When users see this tag, they are likely well versed enough in the social contexts within their community to understand its implications and use that knowledge to decide if they want to interact with that text. Users who wish to make new content about omega characters will understand this context when creating their own stories. The consensus regarding the “omega” tag will likely influence the newer content users are making. If these users do not adhere to the social consensus of what the “omega” tag implies, their work will not fit in, per se, with their peers’. In other words, the content of their work(s) will not fit into the expectations of their audience(s). When writing and remixing new content for the “omega” tag, users will know to retain the core principles of the tag’s social contexts when adding their own spin to the narrative.

Within Wattpad, communities gather and interact with one another, social contexts form, general consensus ideologies are generated, and the folklore of that community begins to reflect that information—which is a dynamic Wattpad tends to maintain quite well. With the addition of Tag Rankings, users can see what social contexts are more popular than others. These subtle context clues allow users to understand the discourse that their online community is concerned with, which in turn allows them to determine how they might contribute to it. By structuring the design and layout of the browsing pages in this manner, Wattpad users are more likely to feel connected to their online community, which pushes them to further participate in that same community by contributing to prominent discourses happening within it.

The “omega” tag was chosen as an example of these social contexts because the nature of its sensitive and extreme content also serves as an example of the lack of policing applied to Wattpad’s works. The content within the stories that have this tag can be quite extreme at times. However, that content is allowed to remain on Wattpad without being taken down and is usually just given a mature rating. Given that the mere mention of a maturity rating indicates some type of content policing on Wattpad, it is important to discuss the implications of this specific textual branding.

For the most part, the content within Wattpad stories is not heavily regulated or policed by the website. However, users are given the option to report stories for inappropriate content and the definition of such is determined by each individual user. The maturity rating is in place to give users a warning that the content they may be interacting with might be triggering in some manner. By choosing to include a maturity rating, the authors of these texts are essentially extending a courtesy to their fellow community members, which decreases the likelihood that their stories will be reported. Such triggering topics might include, but are not limited to: abuse, assault, murder, or any other activity or ideology that might be considered wrong, immoral, or outrageous. The maturity rating allows users to explore Wattpad’s content at their own discretion. However, just because a story is reported does not mean that it will be taken down.

Considering that folklore has always interacted with taboo content, Wattpad’s implementation of the option to include a maturity rating is interesting to say the least. As Bascom notes, “folklore reveals man's frustrations and attempts to escape in

fantasy from repressions imposed upon him by society, whether these repressions be sexual or otherwise and whether they result from taboos on incest or polygamy, or from a taboo on laughing at a person afflicted by yaws” (343). Here, Bascom explains that folklore might deal with any type of taboo, ranging from a variety of differing extremes. Wattpad’s maturity rating, then, both acknowledges the presence of those extremes while simultaneously warning its users of them.

It is possible that such a rating option is in place to help create a stronger sense of social context for users. For example, a teenaged user’s parents might not approve of their child reading about certain content. And, even though Wattpad’s interface is very thorough in appropriately representing its content, some of that information may be lost to some users. Miscommunications do happen. The maturity rating is in place to help those users navigate content that is appropriate for them, users who might be in similar situations as the aforementioned teenager. In a traditional setting, such social context might be gained by a community’s reaction or response to the teenager entering their space. Or, more simply, a storyteller might refuse to tell their tale if the teenager is present. Given the all-access nature of the Internet, it is impossible to directly replicate this traditional social context. Therefore, the maturity rating option is Wattpad’s online representation of such context.

Thus, where similar websites might place “limits on account creation” to maintain “the reputation of hosting high-quality work,” Wattpad does not (Hellekson 128). Essentially, practically anything goes on Wattpad. If Wattpad policed the work of its users, it would be limiting the access that individuals have to its platform and

archive. Any person in the world can create a profile on *Wattpad.com*, which will then grant them the ability to write anything they wish and add it to Wattpad's archive at their own discretion.

Even further, Internet users do not even need an account on Wattpad to access its archive. Such an open environment inspires the most expansive and inclusive participation of its users, which would be harmed by a significant amount of policing. To examine Wattpad's archive—even beyond the scope of this project—is to seek an understanding of how online archival communities are impacting folklore in general. And, of course, “without question, digital archives are a crucial way of enhancing preservation capacities and extending access to collections” (Tolbert and Johnson 340). To police such an archive is to limit its potential.

A discussion of policing regarding Wattpad must also acknowledge the existence of the Wattpad Paid Stories program, as it likely impacts the type of content certain creators are making. While the Paid Stories program does not directly police the content that partakes in the program, users may join this program by invite only. Initially, one might assume that the authors are invited to join the Paid Stories program solely based upon the type of content they create. However, authors may also be invited to join the program based on the popularity of their work. Therefore, users interested in being invited to join the Paid Stories program might cater their works more closely to the social contexts within their respective Wattpad communities.

Once a writer's work—or series of works—gains enough popularity to garner an invite from the Paid Stories program, that user may choose if they want to participate or not. Essentially, deciding not to participate in the program does not affect a user's Wattpad experience. However, if a user should choose to partake in the Paid Stories program, they will gain the ability to monetize their work, receiving a payment each time a user reads a text they have published. Once a user opts to join the Paid Stories program, their works evolve from partaking in folkloric practices to becoming a commercialized work, as has been done with numerous folkloric images even before the Internet. However, Paid Stories do not become fixed in space, meaning they can still be edited, changed, and published serially—which makes Paid Stories not fit fully into the definition of a commercialized work. Users may also interact with Paid Stories in the exact same manner in which they interact with non-paid stories—in terms of commenting, voting, and so on. In terms of categorization, or tagging, Paid Stories are treated the same as non-paid stories. However, they do receive an additional tag (“Paid Stories”) that groups them together so that users may find them with ease.

According to the Wattpad website, the “Paid Stories [program] is born out of our readers’ desire to give back to their favorite writers” (“Readers”). For writers to get paid for their content, users (or readers) “need Coins to read Paid Stories,” which may be purchased with a digital form of payment (“Readers”). In essence, users may choose to digitally buy online coins from Wattpad for a set price. Once they have done so, they may redeem them to read any of the texts in the Paid Stories category.

Purchasing content may be accomplished in one of two ways: buying “one chapter at a time” for a small number of coins each or “the whole story at once” for a larger number of coins at once (“Readers”). The cost of each story is currently determined by length—longer stories require more coins to be purchased in their entirety. Authors will then receive a commission based on the number of coins that are redeemed for their stories. However, “all Paid Stories will have several free chapters to preview before” requiring users to use coins to unlock the remainder of the story (“Frequently Asked”). This rule is in place to protect readers from using coins on stories they might not enjoy.

The Paid Stories program serves a dualistic function on Wattpad, as it inspires writers to publish their stories while also inspiring users to participate in the reading and writing processes. Writers will likely be more inclined to further understand the social contexts of their communities in order to create content their communities will like. Such an inclination will require a deeper level of involvement for all of Wattpad’s users. Additionally, the consumers of Wattpad’s content will likely feel that their wants and needs are being heard and accommodated by the content creators they follow—and also by Wattpad itself, as its platform includes a broad range of works (from the folkloric to the commercial). Essentially, the Paid Stories program fosters more intricate user participation within Wattpad while simultaneously allowing users to obtain a broad range of storytelling content—from the folkloric to the commercial.

This particular function of Wattpad is rather new and is still being explored and developed. However, the existence of the Paid Stories program inspires users to

partake in networking so that a larger community of readers and writers may be created on the foundation of sharing content. With the inclusion of this program on Wattpad, users are not only receiving a space in which they can share their stories (or folktales), they are also receiving a space in which they may obtain monetary means to continue to do so full time. In other words, the Paid Stories program on Wattpad offers its users the opportunity to become professional storytellers of sorts—which can inspire more and more people to utilize Wattpad as a medium for their work. It might even be safe to argue that more and more folkloric content will be published on Wattpad because of this program. Additionally, allowing users to become professional storytellers, to a certain point, makes the role of their online identities and authorship much more impactful to their work. Wattpad’s interface, and the permanence a user’s communications on Wattpad’s interface, allows folklorists to better examine the evolution of folkloric content to commercialization—and to see exactly how a user’s identity impacts that process.

As Paid Stories authors and texts become more and more popular, their fandoms and the mass cultures around them will likely become much more prominent. When users begin to build larger communities and discourses regarding Paid Stories texts, user participation in Wattpad will increase. Where user participation is greatest is where folklore has more opportunity to be created. As Nicolle Lamerichs explains, “fandom is intimately connected to the development of a mainstream participatory culture in which the industries increasingly share spaces with their audiences and spur them to become cocreators” (16). Essentially, the author/creator and each of the

audience members have much of the same power: they can both create content inspired by one another. Spaces such as that is where folklore is formed and transmitted. This “creativity of fans can be read as a type of appropriation that borrows and repurposes existing cultural materials to produce something new,” as seen in pre-digital folklore (Lamerichs 17). With the Paid Stories program, Wattpad makes this level of participation more financially possible for some of its users.

While the monetization of texts on Wattpad might initially imply that folklore may no longer exist on its website, as the content has the potential to become commercialized, that assertion does not accommodate the full picture. In fact, the monetization of one’s work does not automatically disqualify the noncommercialized works of others from being folkloric. The act of aiding a creator financially allows them to continue to create more and more content in the future—instead of having to spend their time elsewhere. Their future works, then, can inspire new folkloric content from noncommercialized authors. Take the *Twilight* example for reference. Its franchise very likely inspired newer authors to create stories based on vampires and werewolves. Those newer stories (outside of fanfiction), though inspired by a commercialized work, are not commercialized themselves.

In some way or other, some elements of folklore have always had a level of monetization—either with events like craft fairs or the selling of folk music, for example. In including a means for monetization, Wattpad is incorporating another aspect of storytelling on its platform—as it houses both commercial (via professional storytelling) and noncommercial works. Some storytellers of folktales, in general, have

ended up commercializing their works all throughout history. Wattpad's interface allows for that process to happen in addition to the creation of the noncommercial folktales themselves.

The art of professional storytelling has existed for a significant period of time, whether the creation and consumption of professional, or commercial, content be via movies, music, or even art. Chad Buterbaugh, for example, comments on the impact of professional storytelling by asserting that "if audiences treat a certain form of art as folklore, and the results of this treatment produce new forms of art that possess the qualities of folklore, it is reasonable for folklorists to treat the art likewise, at least on an experimental basis" (158). In other words, the commercialized texts on Wattpad can inspire other users to mimic them or to remix their content into their own folkloric content. It is important to reiterate that all noncommercialized works on Wattpad can become, or be considered, folkloric. Considering that Wattpad's Paid Stories are not fixed in space (they are not unchangeable) and that they themselves inspire newer folkloric content, professional storytellers can be part of the creative folkloric process.

Additionally, the role of authorship in commercialized texts plays a more impactful role in how content is received by an audience. Popular professional storytellers will likely have a larger following, which places more importance on their identities, as more and more people will interact with their online profiles. Thus, the authorship of professional storytellers on Wattpad, in addition to being documented in its online archive, will impact the manner in which users read their works more strongly than authors of noncommercialized works.

Though “some Wattpaders definitely see the platform as a stepping-stone to [commercialization]...Others are less focused on professionalization of their activity and value it primarily as an outlet for creative self-expression, social interaction and validation” (Davies 61). Until those users achieve commercial success, their works are part of the noncommercialized process of sharing and creating folklorically. According to Foster and Tolbert, many folklorists are remiss to consider commercialized works as part of folklore because “a commercially created product...exists in a fixed form that neither exhibits variation through time and space nor changes with each performance” (3). Additionally, commercialized works are typically “shared with people through formal, institutional channels rather than the informal, person-to-person modes most commonly associated with folklore” (Foster and Tolbert 3).

The noncommercialized works on Wattpad are not shared in such a manner as Foster and Tolbert describe, opting for a more informal means of sharing. The means in which Wattpad’s noncommercialized works are created and perpetuated very much align with the Foster and Tolbert’s definition of folklore. While Wattpad’s Paid Stories might be shared with Wattpad users through more formal channels, user communication and interactions within those stories and their forum-like discussions are informal and done with a person-to-person manner.

Even further, the commercialized works in the Paid Stories program also do not *always* contain fixed forms, as their authors may edit and change them at any given time. Those changes can also derive from reader suggestions, as can be done in noncommercial works. Or, they may be done as additional edits that have been

inspired by the works of other Wattpad authors. Therefore, even the Paid Stories texts may still be treated as their noncommercialized counterparts, allowing them to remain part of the folkloric process to some degree.

While commercialization is possible on Wattpad, that does not mean that the noncommercialized stories on Wattpad—those that are being created as folkloric texts—should be given any less credibility. Wattpad’s interface just allows for a broad range of different types of texts to exist on the same platform. The importance of Wattpad as a medium of online folklore does not diminish because of its inclusion of commercialized works.

Wattpad is a website that fosters community, storytelling, and subsequently folklore by design. Its structure—its interface—allows users to connect with each other from anywhere in the world and its programs help those users to maintain their participation in its functions. When individuals gather from across the world for the sole purpose of communicating and storytelling, folklore will soon be present in that space. Wattpad’s interface ensures that will happen on its website.

Communication: How Users Interact with One Another

In addition to understanding the nuances of a user’s online experiences when navigating Wattpad, it is also important to understand exactly how its users interact with one another. There are several means which users may utilize to communicate with others. These means are outside of the published works themselves, though they do serve as communication pieces. Users may utilize the following methods to communicate with one another: commenting, voting, incorporating music and images

into their texts, posting a message on a user's profile page, and direct (or private) messaging. Through these means, Wattpad users have the tools necessary to communicate with each other effectively.

A Wattpad user's ability to comment within texts is perhaps one of their most effective tools of communication, as it is through commenting that users participate in the forum-like discussions that take place on Wattpad. Through these discussions, users may discuss a near limitless number of topics in as much depth as they wish. Though it is important to reiterate that these discussions are *similar* to forums and do not function in the same manner as traditional forums do where each premise and topic is predetermined—like those on *Fanfiction.net*, for example. Therefore, the nature of commenting on Wattpad is as complex as the communications that are happening amongst its users.

For example, users are also able to comment on every paragraph that is written in each chapter of a story. All they must do is hover their cursor over a paragraph, click the add comment button that appears in the bottom right corner of the paragraph, and say whatever they would like (see figure 7). If comments have already been made on a paragraph, the add comment button is immediately visible to each user and indicates how many comments have already been made on that particular paragraph.

In total, located underneath the chapter title, the statistical information users can reference is the number of times that chapter has been read, the number of votes that chapter has received, and the number of comments within that chapter.

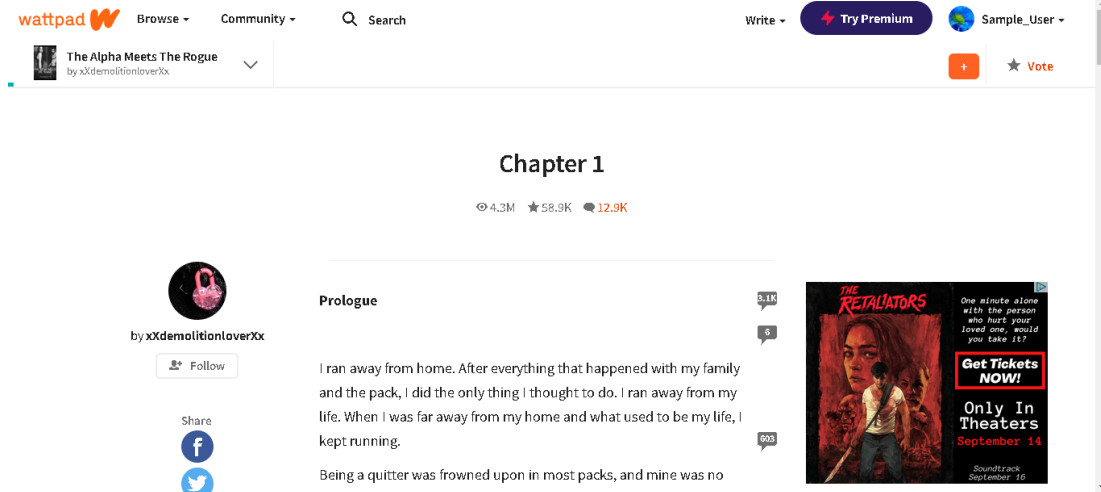


Figure 7. Commenting Interactions Within The Alpha Meets the Rogue by xXdemolitionloverXx

From this statistical information, users and authors can see what specific content is generating interaction and participation amongst readers. Additionally, this allows users to discern which sections of texts and which topics are eliciting the most discourse within their communities. Such an in-depth commenting design also creates a space in which users can almost immediately and consistently have an open discussion about practically every topic, issue, or theme in a Wattpad story.

Being able to initiate such a complex discussion mimics the natural communication patterns that exist in oral communication—the same type of patterns that contribute to the creation, perpetuation, and evolution of folkloric content. What makes this particular aspect of Wattpad’s website design so interesting is that it separates Wattpad’s archival space from physical archival spaces. For example, the comments on Wattpad are immediately recorded and stored within Wattpad’s archive. Comments, then, can be archived content.

That same feat is much harder to accomplish with a physical archive because comments regarding those works would likely occur orally instead of textually. Therefore, those comments would likely never be recorded at all. In other words, “Wattpad is evidence that in the 21st century, thanks to digital technology, diversity in readers’ response can also happen simultaneously on the same reading platform” (Pianzola 34). Therefore, spaces such as Wattpad are much more capable of being mediums for content that is archivally influenced and completely user generated.

In addition to commenting, users also have the option to vote for the chapters or sections of stories that they particularly love, favor, or enjoy. Essentially, as the users are reading a story, they will have an option to vote for that chapter or section in the top right corner of the page. Voting for that chapter usually communicates at least one of the following sentiments to the author or other readers: that particular chapter was written well, something happened in terms of plot that the user particularly enjoyed, the user reacted positively to an aspect of the story that is showcased in that chapter, or the user is directly expressing their support of an author and their text (for whatever reason that might be).

Rosamund Davies comments on this dynamic by explaining that voting “establishes a link between reader and writer since writers are notified of the identities of those who vote on their story. If the writer recognizes the reader back, by following him or her, the reader is then brought to the attention of the writer’s followers” (58). Such an interaction between users facilitates the sense of community that Wattpad is trying to create, as it functions as a type of award system. If one user

supports another, they will return the favor and so on. This type of system, however, is contingent on the identities that users have built for themselves via their profiles. Otherwise, an author recognizing them publicly would not have as much of an impact on a user, which would lead to less voting on stories.

Because “both votes and reads, are totted up and added to the writer’s vital statistics, which are displayed on his or her profile,” users have incentive to be active and to interact with one another (Davies 58). Essentially, high interaction rates indicate a user’s popularity, which functions in much the same way that popularity functions in non-digital communities. As Davies notes, the act of voting creates “an increasingly effective hub for shared value creation by both reader and writer. In this regard, Wattpad functions as an attention economy. The more attention you get, the more attention you generate. Voting is not a one-way process of recognition” (Davies 58).

This same dynamic may be found in traditional (word-of-mouth) folkloric communities. For example, a widely liked storyteller will likely have more people listening to their folktales. And, in return, those people will: recommend that storyteller to others, reiterate the stories they have been told, or take inspiration from what they have heard for their own creative processes. If a popular individual acknowledges someone that is unpopular, the chances of the unpopular person becoming popular themselves almost always increases.

Thus, the larger total number of votes that a story has received for all chapters (which is always displayed), the more likely it is to receive new readers. Users can

discern social context clues from those votes to determine the value of the content within each story. Voting, then, ensures that a text on Wattpad will remain current—which is very similar to the preservation of popular folktales. The more individuals like a story, the more likely they are to preserve it. Even further, users can see how many votes each chapter has received individually. Seeing the votes on individual chapters/sections indicates what writing functions, tendencies, trends, etc. are relevant and worthy of replicating for future use—something many authors likely take note of.

For example, a specific chapter might receive a significantly higher number of votes than the others in a story. This might indicate that there is an element of storytelling that is working better in one chapter than all the others. A user can then take such a social cue and incorporate whatever element that might be into their own work and discussions in the future. Voting serves to replicate aspects of popularity, the presence of trends, and general majority preferences that are typically seen in non-digital communities. Without this element in Wattpad’s website design, users would have a much harder time discerning what content is popular, how certain content is being received, and which users are creating the most digestible content.

Users may also communicate with one another via posting messages on each other’s profile pages. This avenue gives users a more direct means to communicate with their favorite authors, for example, in a public manner. Therefore, users may speak with another user directly but also allow other users the opportunity to join the conversation, as well. In turn, creators have the opportunity to respond to their

audience members—especially when discussing a text. This process is quite similar to the direct messaging option that users have on Wattpad—the only difference being that other users cannot view direct messages because they are private communications. With these tools, users can communicate with one another directly.

While there are many different manners in which users might interact with one another, Wattpad’s interface provides easy navigation for its users. The ability to not only communicate with one another but to know which conversations are more popular and relevant is an element of digital communication that quickens the pace and nature of user interaction. This quickened process allows for an even quicker process of creating folklore, as the more that individuals interact with each other the more they will share stories—especially on a storytelling platform.

III. Conclusion

This project discusses only the beginning of a much larger discourse that is forming within the folklore discipline—a discourse that will serve to identify and characterize the nature of online folkloric content as it is being created in contemporary society. *Wattpad.com* is a website that is contributing to the changes we are seeing within folklore by providing people with an online archival space that eradicates geographical and cultural barriers for the sake of storytelling. The interface of such a space is designed to be fully capable of providing the tools in which to create new folkloric content.

Because Wattpad is so heavily influenced by the archive, the nature of the folklore its users are creating consists of different nuances than traditional (word-of-mouth) folklore—such as tagging, for example. However, that is not to say that these differences increase or decrease the value of the folktales that the Internet is producing. The medium in which they are created and transmitted is just evolving alongside our society. Taking note of these changes and identifying new folkloric content as it is being created will help push this discourse even further into the future—making it possible for other folklorists to delve deeper into the implications of folklore being created online.

This project provides an overview of how Internet spaces have shaped online folklore and how Wattpad's interface is designed to perpetuate this process. Wattpad,

and similar websites, will continue to alter contemporary folklore as we understand it—especially as media and society continue to evolve. Because content on the Internet can change so quickly at any given time, identifying current spaces in which folklore can exist is crucial in documenting the nuances of those changes. This project only touches on the foundational premise of such a discourse. It is my hope that future folklorists may use this project as a steppingstone to further examine how spaces like Wattpad are facilitating so many changes in the field of folklore.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Hyperlinks to Important Wattpad Texts and User Interactions

Appendix A: Hyperlinks to Important Wattpad Texts and User Interactions

This appendix of hyperlinks is organized alphabetically, for ease of perusal. Additionally, each hyperlink has been paired with relevant bibliographic information, as well as a brief description of the hyperlink's significance, or contribution to the discussion. Each of these additional sources have been provided for the reader so that they may further explore Wattpad, its interface, the content that its users have created, and the interactions and communications its users have established amongst one another.

The sources are as follows:

Dreammcatcher. "His Second Chance." *Wattpad*,

<https://www.wattpad.com/story/168280800-his-second-chance-%E2%9C%94>

This text is a very popular story on Wattpad that contains thousands of comments and votes, along with millions of reads. This text also gives multiple examples of a Wattpad author communicating directly with their audience members. The Wattpad user interactions within the forum-like discussions from this text serve as great examples of the types of folkloric interactions this project has identified. This text also includes examples of a Wattpad user including images in their work.

Eleonora18943. "Sofia's Secret Mafia Brothers." *Wattpad*,

<https://www.wattpad.com/story/286615413-sofia%27s-secret-mafia-brothers?fbclid=IwAR3I9y9a3nsV0BUek9cj-LEFobYOSdqLH4hwZ9pQrtgRrkqEfu5LkRo4q8>.

This text has garnered millions of reads, along with thousands of votes and comments, making this text a good example of a successful Wattpad story. The user interactions within the comment sections of this story are more in-depth and expressive. The author of this story also utilizes video content, which is also a good example of other users might utilize this same narratological element.

Ivojovi. "The Other CEO." *Wattpad*, <https://www.wattpad.com/950641971-the-other-ceo-author%27s-note?fbclid=IwAR3ZNcpGIN79HI4Ii0JOPyIPbUZwqNyws-jPx5k7RFL1AHSOKcZPT7WIP70>.

This text has been included because it is a popular Paid Story. Further exploring this text, and especially the author's note, will give more direct context into how the commercialization of folkloric works plays into storytelling on Wattpad. While the commercialization of this text no longer makes it folkloric, Wattpad users still interact with this text in a folkloric-like manner. Exploring the comment sections, and reading through the forum-like discussions within this text, will help make this concept more concrete.

JordanLynde. "Hired to Love." *Wattpad*, <https://www.wattpad.com/story/46159699-hired-to-love>.

This link has been provided because this story was directly referenced in the discussion above, regarding a user's comment. Providing a link to the text itself allows one to gain further access to the nuances of Gem002_'s comment. Additionally, one may observe what elements of the author's online presence elicited such a response.

Loveme105. "The Whipping." *Wattpad*, <https://www.wattpad.com/story/220614934-the-whipping>.

This is another popular Wattpad text with millions of reads. This story has garnered a lot of user interaction. This text provides a deeper insight into the nuances of Wattpad user interaction and serves as an example of the folkloric storytelling elements this project has discussed.

Miss_Guided01. "100 Short Scary Stories." *Wattpad*, <https://www.wattpad.com/story/113056582-100-short-scary-stories?fbclid=IwAR3WIEAOg-bEdTnt6iYP5IO54gwUk3R7xbGSy81XAd3i4uPJSg5t5rxZATU>.

This Wattpad text has been included in this appendix because it serves as a more direct example of folkloric practices happening within Wattpad. This text, or anthology of sorts, is a collection of short stories. Wattpad users have interacted with this text very organically and thoroughly and showcases the sharing of folktales, or folklore.

MyDearAuthor. "The Howl of Claim." *Wattpad*, <https://www.wattpad.com/story/227274095-the-howl-of-claim-%E2%9C%93?fbclid=IwAR3WIEAOg-bEdTnt6iYP5IO54gwUk3R7xbGSy81XAd3i4uPJSg5t5rxZATU>.

This story has been included because it is a popular text and provides good examples of an author interacting with their audience. Additionally, this author describes the lore (or even folklore, if you will) of their text so that their

audience members may follow the plotline of their story more successfully. The inclusion of such content implies that it, along with other versions of lore, is part of the nuances of the respective Wattpad communities.

Neverfakeit. "Lexi's Promise." *Wattpad*, <https://www.wattpad.com/story/84122683-lexi%27s-promise>.

This hyperlink has been provided because the author's note from this story is directly mentioned above. Including this link allows for quick access to the full text, along with its contexts and how users have reacted to it.

SammyE9. "The Vampire and the Ghost." *Wattpad*, <https://www.wattpad.com/story/254479289-the-vampire-and-the-ghost-%E2%9C%94%E2%8E%8E?fbclid=IwAR2WZzQ8Engrlz6-LInaG22A8O-dQKAddkdVovH7Z00n-Wcwl2e0crEp1xo>.

This text, currently having only two-hundred thousand reads, is less popular than most of the other texts included in this appendix. Though the comment sections are a little sparser within this text, the comments that do exist are full of constructive criticism for the author and their text. The user interactions within this text serve as direct examples of how communicating with other Wattpad users can alter the course of story's narrative.

Thatoneweirdgurrl. "Blue Eyes (A Paranormal Romance)". *Wattpad*, <https://www.wattpad.com/story/79886986-blue-eyes-a-paranormal-romance?fbclid=IwAR0VaoKOWH-idJITcNcLxTDGaDd6q33NtMHmpmgOnU7vf1Lj6S8VRQxVSmo>.

A popular text, this story is another great example of the intricacies of Wattpad user interaction and communication. This story has been included in this list of works because this author directly expresses their desire to pair each chapter of their text with a song. Having access to a text that includes a multimodal means of storytelling, and its audience's reactions, makes the content within this appendix more well-rounded.

Thebarbiegirl95. "The Boy That Lives in My House." *Wattpad*,

https://www.wattpad.com/story/80957257-the-boy-that-lives-in-my-house?fbclid=IwAR3APWOEHXvMyMzjOyd3VoUh1ixCYNrRXHr3QgjmAJb9tOBgOIX_e52eXk.

This text, at roughly one million reads, is another popular Wattpad story that has garnered a significant amount of user participation. Exploring this text, and the comments within it, will provide one with a deeper level of context regarding the discussion within this project.

Whiskeyqueenn. "Bessa." *Wattpad*, <https://www.wattpad.com/story/143408462-bessa>.

This text has been included in this appendix because it was directly mentioned in the discussion above. This hyperlink will provide quick access to this work, along with Lauralcava's comment. *Bessa* is a popular story on Wattpad and has a significant amount of comments and votes from its users. Exploring the contexts of Lauralcava's comment, along with other user interactions, will give further insight into the importance of Lauralcava's comment.

World_joy_. "Pride and Ashes: A Werewolf Story." *Wattpad*,

<https://www.wattpad.com/story/80242423-pride-and-ashes-a-werewolf-story>

This Wattpad story has a significant level of popularity, with currently fourteen million reads. The amount of user interaction and communication is significant within this text. Exploring its contents may provide one with a deeper understanding of Wattpad's nuances.