POKER FANS GO ALL-IN:

FROM SPECTATOR TO FAN TO PLAYER

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In the last few years, the game of poker has experienced an increase in players and fans unlike any time in the long history of the game. What has created this cultural phenomenon? In "The Consumption of Everyday Life," John Storey quotes Henry Jenkins' observation that what is "particularly empowering about fandom is its struggle to create 'a more participatory culture' from 'the very forces that transform many Americans into spectators" (126). Through the mediums of television and movies, from the World Series of Poker to the movie *Rounders*, people who are "spectators" of poker want to become involved and join the "participatory culture" of the game. The amateur poker scene is also driven by a new breed of player who play online poker. Daniel Habib, in "Online and Obsessed," explores the growing culture of online poker players and their "transformation" from spectator to participant and from "fan" to "actor." The essence of being a fan is not just being content with participating on the level of other fans, but striving to become a "participant" to the point where you are the "player" the "spectators" watch. Participation as a fan is, in actuality, a pathway towards the specific knowledge that empowers players within the poker world. There is no better example of the transformation from spectator to fan to player than Chris Moneymaker, who came out of nowhere to win the World Series of Poker Main Event in 2003. Here is a pure case of the amateur, or the fan, gaining status as an "actor" or player.

If the number of players has increased exponentially since poker was first played in Wild West saloons, a major contributing factor is the advent of online poker because of one of the inherent aspects of what Storey calls "fan culture." As Storey observes, "Fans do not just read texts, they continually reread them" (125). Poker transcends time and generations because the new players have merged a technology of their time, the Internet, with the old game of poker to "reread" the game with a contemporary twist. Habib shows the change in the game's culture with a quote from one of pioneers of poker, the legendary Doyle Brunson. "Part of the thrill of the poker I grew up with is that you can send your opponents home with their tails tucked between their legs, whimpering and whining.... Sadly, that thrill is gone from online poker. You can't send opponents home whimpering, because they're already home

whimpering" (67). The new poker fans are able to change and "reread" the old style of game play by utilizing their culture, the Internet, and merging it with the old style to create something new. The context of the new poker player has shifted, or has been "re-read," from the dangerous and risky situation of the Old West when players would sit face to face with the cards in one hand and a pistol in the other, to the Internet age of detached individuals sitting alone in their dorm rooms utilizing probability models and calculated risk aversion.

Online poker is not only a way to bring a new generation of poker players to the game, it allows greater participation by more people more frequently. "The number of hands you can play, the amount of thinking and studying you can do about those hands—everything's accelerated" (Habib). Traveling to a table at a Las Vegas casino is not necessary with the online poker sites that offer a free trial with virtual money, allowing the game to be experienced by anyone with a computer and Internet connection, "accelerating" participation and involvement in the game. Also contributing to the participation level fans can get with the real action is the coverage of poker on television. The World Series of Poker on ESPN, the World Poker Tour on Travel Channel, and even Celebrity Poker on Bravo allow fans to become part of the action. The advent of the "rabbit cam," a camera allowing television viewers to see the cards of the players, gives the audience a higher participatory level with the experience of playing alongside the competitors at the table. Poker shows also offer opportunities for spectators at home to win seats at a televised tournaments, which feeds a fan's desire to pursue that transformation into a poker "actor."

Accelerated involvement brings the fan an important tool, knowledge. When poker fans observe the different hands through the "rabbit cam," they are acquiring knowledge by watching the experts studying and playing those hands. With this knowledge, they gain a "power to participate in the original text" in a way that a spectator can not without the specialized knowledge that fans gain through their participation. As Lisa A. Lewis points out in her book *The Cultural Economy of Fandom*, knowledge is a driving force for fan participation.

> Fan cultural knowledge differs from official cultural knowledge in that
> it is used to enhance the fan's… power over, and participation in, the
> original, industrial text. The *Rocky Horror* fans who know every line of
> dialogue in the film use that knowledge to participate in and even
> rewrite the text.   (43)

Fan power allows the fan to rewrite the original text in a way that conforms to their liking, changing the values inherent in the game from the older values of intimidation and rugged force to the intellectual elements of poker. However, it would not be accurate to say that everyone who plays the game is a fan. Storey says "the difference between a fan reader and other readers is a question of the intensity of intellectual and emotional involvement which constitutes the reader's pre-established values" (125). A true poker fan participates in the game not for an occasional recreational break, but becomes part of the whole experience of a poker play by studying and employing the "intricacies and different strategies" that most lay people would not understand or notice (Habib). A real fan sees more than dollars changing hands, like this losing player Habib quotes: "I'm not thinking about the money there," she observed, "I'm thinking about pot odds. I walked away from that table satisfied. I wasn't thinking that $2,700 was a lot of money—and if I was, only because it was one tenth of my bankroll. I was thinking that I made the right play" (Habib). This player was not concerned with the money, as most amateur players would be, because she was focusing on her overall strategy based on her "pre-established values." She was able to take a "loser" situation and interpret it in the terms of a participant. Her reaction to losing a large sum of money was regulated by her values as a poker player, which allowed her to be more a part of the process of poker, where the spectator would only be concerned with that one moment of a monetary loss.

Fans want to breakdown the barriers between the actors and themselves, to consider themselves equals to the "player" they admire; by consuming the same items as their idols, and adopting the same values they can feel they are participants in the event rather than just "spectators." Lisa Lewis quotes John Storey's comments about consumption and fan culture:

> Fans are very participatory. Sports crowds wearing their team's colors
> or rock audiences dressing and behaving like the bands become part of
> the performance. This melding on the team or performer and the fan
> into a productive community minimized differences between artist and
> audience. (40)

Poker fans, however, go beyond wearing dark sunglasses like the professionals but like the player Habib described also adopt their behavior and attitudes. David Sklansky, for example, is a popular figure in poker who is known for developing theory and strategy. Habib claims that "[Sklansky] defined how to think—an air of

certitude accompanies [his] discussions of philosophy and tactics." Just as fans of sports teams and bands become involved through conforming to the dress and actions, poker fans conform to the thought process of renowned poker actors like Sklansky, supporting Storey's notion that "there is something empowering about what fans do with those texts in the process of assimilating them to the particulars of their lives" (126). There is no inherent importance in itself when fans wear the apparel that represents their favorite team or band or when a poker player reads books and articles by a favorite player. It is the "empowerment" fans feel when they establish a bond with the object of their fascination by wearing that apparel or reading that book.

The term "fan" has been used to describe people who display some fan characteristics such as imitating the dress or interests of an idol. However, not all of these people really fall into the category of "fan," which is characterized by an intense emotional attachment a fan feels. Storey cites Henry Jenkins' idea that fan culture is in "opposition to the values and norms of everyday life, as people who live more richly, feel more intensely, play more freely, and think more deeply than 'mundanes'" (126). A "fan," in fact, has an intimate relationship with his obsession, and derives a deeper meaning from the process of participating and interacting with him, as opposed to the *going-through-the-motions* attitude of the "mundane" spectator. This deep emotional commitment is shown in the movie *Rounders,* which revolves around the quest of one poker fan, Mike McDermott, to become a professional poker player. Although he identifies with poker, Mike temporarily gives it up and tries to conform to the rules of the "mundane" society in which he is a lawyer. He is unsuccessful, however, and finds himself being drawn back to the poker table; in the movie, he recalls that when he sat down at a card table again, "I felt alive for the first time since [I last played]" (*Rounders*). McDermott feels alive because this is where he feels connected, this is where he is "emotionally involved," and this is where he is allowed to exercise his "pre-established values" as a poker player. He ultimately rejects "the values and norms of everyday life" because he cannot separate poker from his life outside of poker, since poker is his identity.

One of the reasons that poker fans are so intensely drawn to the game is because they have "rewritten" the Old West game in contemporary terms. In an analysis of the connection of self-identity and fan identity, Justin Peters in "Jack of Smarts" describes the relation between the poker fan and his obsession. "Strategy-

oriented, individualistic, and embedded in a nice masculine mythology, poker is the perfect game for the revenge-of-the-nerds generation looking to square their intelligence with their inner maleness" (Peters). Poker fans have taken the aspects of "masculine mythology" embedded within the Old West game of poker and rewritten them in terms of the new technology, and have identified themselves with both. Interestingly, in "Nascar Racing Fans," M. Graham Spann writes that "studying identity formation among NASCAR racing fans centers on subcultural norms and values. Identity refers to who or what one is, to the various meanings attached to oneself by self and others" (359). A fan seeks an identity through the "meanings attached" to their obsessions, and in the case of poker fans, they acquire the "masculine mythology" identity that Peters describes by their participation in the game. This confirms Storey's point that fans are more "emotionally involved" not only by participating in the technical aspects of poker, but also for the meanings attributed to poker that the fan identifies with. As long as fans like Mike McDermott in *Rounders* become inseparable from poker, "identify" themselves with poker, and have "intense involvement" and "attachment to the norms and values" of poker, then the fan is going to have the drive to participate at deeper levels.

As a fan gains experience and participates more, he has a growing urge to become more involved. In the movie *Rounders*, Mike McDermott envisions himself as the new face of poker fame at the pinnacle, the World Series of Poker, participating alongside established poker professionals: "I had this big picture in my head, sitting next to Johnny Chan and Amarillo Slim, playing in the World Series of Poker." This is an example of what Storey called "personalization," or "the insertion of the writer into a version of their favorite television [program]," one of the ways fans create, produce, and interact with what they are fans of (125). In Mike's case, he "inserts" himself into the most prestigious event in the world of poker, in his fantasies attempting to surpass the participating "fan" that he is and become more like Johnny Chan or Amarillo Slim, the players he admires. In *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins claims that fans exploit texts to serve their own interests through fan-created fiction, and in his scenario, Mike has reached a point in his fandom where he desires more, a bigger role, a more participatory part of the poker world; he is ready to be more like an "actor" of his "own growing interests." Mike is also intent on validating his obsession by taking advantage of an aspect of poker history that supports his cause. As Lawrence Shapiro points out in his essay "Multiple Realizations,"

in the movie *Rounders*, [Mike McDermott,] intent on convincing his girlfriend that success in poker is not merely a matter of luck, draws her attention to the fact that the same faces are present year after year in the World Series of Poker tournament. More explicitly, the poker player is asking his girlfriend to consider two hypotheses: 1. success in poker is purely a matter of luck; 2. success in poker requires skill.

Mike is pointing out that there is more to poker than most people can see, that there have been multiple winners of the World Series of Poker, but that those multiple winners have been a consistent few, exploiting facts about poker that he knows in an attempt to prove to his girlfriend that his desire to become a professional poker player is not a crazy or wild dream.

This leads to a problem with Storey's theory of fandom, however. Storey only speaks of instances and episodes a fan will experience, but does not explain how a fan first becomes a fan or how fandom ends. There actually seems to be an unfinished element to the process of fandom. Fandom is not a static *idea*, it is an evolving process due to the changing level of participation the fan experiences. The more a fan gets involved and participates, the more intense a fan he will become. In *Rounders*, Mike McDermott describes the obvious newcomers, online poker players who show their lack of experience by joining a Las Vegas casino table: "Down here to have a good time they figure 'Why not give poker a try, it can't be any different than our home game'" (*Rounders*). The poker fan calls the inexperienced participant trying to enter their world of poker a "fish." These "fish" are spectators who participate on occasion but know little more than a "mundane" or lay person because of their lack of participation and dedication to being a fan. The lesson is that participation alone cannot constitute a real fan because the "fish" do not understand the intricacies or have the knowledge that are so valued and deeply studied by the more serious fans. So there must be some level, some turning point where one makes the transition from spectator to fan and fan to actor.

The question of what will happen once a fan becomes an actor is not explained by Storey's theory of fan culture. Because it is an inherent trait of fans to experience more of their fandom, it is inevitable that, if they continue being a fan, they will one day reach the status of "actor," or at least continue striving towards it. There is no better story to be told of such a case than Chris Moneymaker winning the World Series of Poker Main Event in 2003. Here is Mike McDermott's dream come true, a

pure case of the fan gaining the status of an actor. Moneymaker honed his skills online for a period, developed enough fan knowledge that he was able to participate successfully, and eventually acknowledged he was on the level of the other professionals—he became an actor. He followed the basic outline of a fan's evolution: participate to gain knowledge, participate to break barriers between fan and actor, and create an identity as a poker player.

Early in the tournament he won, Moneymaker was seen on television commenting on what an honor it was to play alongside such poker legends as Doyle Brunson and Johnny Chan; and yet, after winning the tournament, other newcomers found it an honor to play with him. This shows that it is possible to be both actor and fan at the same time. In an interview with Jeff Shulman of Cardplayer.com, Moneymaker states "yes, there was a point that I thought I could play with these guys. On the second day, Phil Ivey and Johnny Chan took turns slapping me around" (Shulman). Speaking with Phil Hevener in *Poker Player,* he adds that "I was a rookie till I got to the final table but all of a sudden I wasn't a rookie anymore" (Hevener). Moneymaker was transformed by his win from a fan of Ivey and Chan into a real actor able to perform equally with them; his Cinderella story appealed to many individuals who then became fans of his work, which led him to play both roles of fan and actor without separating from either. "Fandom, Storey asserts, "represents a desperate attempt to compensate for the shortcomings of modern life" (123). In the case of Moneymaker, poker may have filled some "shortcoming" in his life, but he still maintained his "mundane" job as an accountant, showing that his fan identity could be expressed through participating in poker more frequently than most, but still keeping balanced in the mundane sense of earning a "normal" living working as an accountant. Therefore, to better understand the fan, Storey must be able to explain the transformation fans go through in a case like Moneymaker's, because an individual does not just become a fan. There is a process that fans go through where different levels of participation give them more depth in their fandom.

If you are a fan of poker, you have inevitably envisioned, or "personalized," yourself sitting at the final table of the World Series of Poker winning the title and millions of dollars because there is no better way to exhibit your intellectual and emotional involvement to the game than at the World Series of Poker. As poker fans, the spectators look at the feat of Chris Moneymaker winning the biggest professional poker tournament as an amateur who started playing online, and identify themselves

with his story. Here is a quintessential, middle class no-name fan of poker who rose to stardom in the poker community. This is possibly how the rise of a poker fan begins, through the enticing message of "you can be the next be the next poker millionaire." After people are initiated into the world of poker, however, there are those who become awe-struck by the feeling of accomplishment that the game can bring you, and they are the ones that begin to evolve into the fans. A fan is able to put his values as a poker fan ahead of anything else in order to participate. As a fan advances in levels of participation from the fan stage to the actor stage, and possibly even to both, there comes more opposition to the mundane norm with each step. However, the fan identity is too complex to reduce to one type, as the fan is in a constant evolutionary process with increasing or decreasing stages of their participation level. As for the poker fan, only time will tell a poker fan will "hold 'em or fold 'em."

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