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Pop Culture Matters

Pop culture surrounds our lives in ways we don't even realize.

As much as we think that fiction doesn't affect reality we could replace all the heads of Mount Rushmore with Bart Simpson, Spongebob Squarepants, Mickey Mouse and Super Mario and almost everyone worldwide would recognize each head and still travel to see such an iconic monument! But is it about these characters and films that make them such cultural icons? Is it by sheer design, or is it because there's an individual experience that can be had about each one of them?

You're a kid in 1975, school is almost over and you're staring deeply into the clock on the wall waiting for each second to pass. *Tick, tick, tick,* class seems to drag on for longer than it needs to. You nudge your friend's shoulder as she's flipping through a magazine with the top films coming out this summer. "*Rollerball?* Nah.. *Nashville?* We can't watch that! What's that movie with the shark we saw a trailer for on TV?" Someone across your shoulder hums *dun-uhh... dun-uh... Dun-uh-dun-uh-dun-uh!* The school bell blairs, children cheer and run out of the halls to hit the movies!

Referencing Sasha Stone's personal experience in *Voir: 'Summer of the Shark,'* Jaws became something nostalgic for viewers and non-viewers alike. Not just for its value as a film, but as a

certain time and place. You couldn't escape seeing Jaws t-shirts when you went out, groups of kids with Jaws lunchboxes at school, people who had never stepped foot near the ocean were deathly afraid of water, fans were praising a humble director like he was God. If you were alive in 1975 you weren't just living in the summer of '75, you were living in The Summer of the Shark! Advertisers saw how popular Jaws was getting and how much money it was making, so they didn't want to waste a second of the action without making a profit. Everything a fanboy could've dreamed of had Jaws paraphernalia slapped onto it, but trust me, there were hysterical fangirls too! Fangirls had all the passion and enthusiasm for films that fanboys did, yet they were treated so much differently. Like living in the sewers versus walking on the street you weren't viewed or even considered by the eyes of the public. However, up on the surface there were laws and rules to their society, fanboys said you had to only consume and enjoy Jaws a certain way and being a fangirl down below you were free to think and say however you felt about that movie. As a fangirl in middle school I treated the shows I watched like clay and the characters like my dolls, I could make up my own story within a story! But if I tried to do that as a fanboy I would immediately get shunned and told "You can't do that, it isn't what canonly happens in the story!" So what if Goku isn't Mexican in Dragon Ball Z? He's not a real person so it doesn't really matter how I personally view his character. The Goku in your head can be different from the Goku in my head and I'm fine with that.

Fan culture is often just repackaged obsession. If you're not watching director's cuts, interviews, sending fan letters, and buying everything with Jaws on it, you wouldn't be considered a real fan. But since girls were swooped completely under the radar, it felt sort of freeing to watch your

favorite film over and over. I watched Jaws 40 times this summer purely for my enjoyment, not for the approval of any of you!

But snapping out of the fantasy realm of Jaws, time causes changes. With time passing these fanboys turn into men and fangirls turn into women, the women get looked upon and treated as a part of someone else's fantasy. Fangirls become objectified and the experience fades from the good memories laughing with your girl friends to the gross comments from the guy next to you. The community loosens and starts to polarize the fans once again, and as fangirls become isolated they get excluded again.

This sort of fan culture reminds me of The Eltingville Club by Evan Dorkin, about four nerds who are always trying to one-up each other in obsession over their favorite movies and shows. Each comic ends with a big fight happening, the boys turning out bruised and without regard for anybody around them. Something always catches on fire, a priceless piece of merchandise gets destroyed, and a person the boys look up to loses all respect for them. Although The Eltingville Club is meant to be a complete satire of fanboys that treat fiction like reality and reality like fiction, the characters often feel too accurate to just be parody. They're rowdy, hypocritical, and tend to be ruder to other nerds than the 'popular' kids!

While on the topic of nerds, The Incredible Hulk television show and its general aesthetic provided the perfect metaphor for how anger controls you and how it can be incredibly harmful, yet viewers completely ignored it when they were kids. This is almost identical to how fans of Jaws ignored the shark being a pure metaphor for fear and only wanted to see naked ladies getting eaten ferociously.

According to Bill Bixby, "After an angry outburst, regardless of what provoked it, I immediately feel an acidic pain deep in my stomach, followed by waves of nausea: a concoction of shame mixed with sadness churning inside." Growing up I must admit I never was font of the Hulk because I only saw him the way the rest of the kids saw him, as this colossal brute that yelled and crushed the bad guys senseless. He didn't seem cool to me, he didn't sound human. I could only understand the Hulk when my father explained his story to me in depth. And as I listened I flashed back to whenever I did something bad, my father would fold his lips inwards, he would stare me down and I knew I would face some sort of punishment. He never abused me in any way but he would get angry at me to a point that made me afraid of him all throughout my childhood. But hearing this story in my father's voice, I felt like I could see his side of the story. The Hulk was reflecting right through my dad in the words he was saying and I now knew that when he would let the monster out without realizing it, he never meant any harm towards me. As bumpy as my relationship with my father was, I can forgive him now for unleashing the Hulk within him all those years ago because he has shown me that it was never his intention. Pop culture will always have a deeper meaning that gets us to become closer to others than we realize, and we take all of it for granted!

With what we consider pop culture, if you're over the age of 30 you wouldn't think a video game made in 2016 by a niche composer that was madly in love with an even more niche webcomic is culturally significant at all until you ask anyone that was a teen on the internet.

But like lifting up a rock and discovering all these bugs crawling around under it, Undertale sold 6.4 million copies on Steam alone as of 2024, has gotten mentions on news channels after a mother asked her daughter why she had "such demonic images on her phone" when she found a

photo of Sans in her camera roll, Megalovania has been played by an orchestra to the Pope of France in 2022 and Sans has been added to Super Smash Bros Ultimate as a costume for Mii fighters. You couldn't open TikTok or Instagram in 2018 without seeing a meme using the first four notes of Megalovania as the punchline. Band kids in middle school were trying so hard to learn Megalovania on their ukuleles or pianos or trombones. Occasionally you would see a kid at the mall wearing a polyester jacket from Redbubble with Undertale fanart that was probably manufactured without the artist's knowledge.

It is truly inspirational that this game made entirely with pixel art, a soundtrack of beeps and boops, and a kickstarter of $1,400 became this internet phenomenon practically overnight! Toby didn't even know how to code when making Undertale, he used GameMaker! There are multibillion dollar companies to this day trying to figure out how to develop a video game with the same spark that a game made from a free-to-use program! Toby Fox you are one inspiring man and you have no clue how much I idolize you. Megalovania as earlier explained went viral and was used in meme culture for years after Undertale's release, but did you know the song didn't originate from the game? Toby Fox previously used and composed Megalovania for Andrew Hussie's webcomic Homestuck, and even earlier for Toby's Earthbound Romhack!

When I discovered Undertale, I, like many middle schoolers, didn't find out about the game by playing it myself, but through the completely mischaracterized fanworks.

Since Undertale blew up in popularity, fans have created thousands upon thousands of drawings, animations, music videos, songs, original characters, parodies, fan games and even alternate universes all in the name of Undertale. Three years after Undertale's release without any additional content or sequel you would expect the game to reach the end of its fifteen minutes of

fame like a movie star getting kicked out of show business, but the fans were still hungry for more. If we can't get any more then we'll make more for ourselves!

In the form of alternate universes, or AUs, fans created so much more from the mere concept of "What if everything was the same in this story except the monsters had swapped personalities? What if one character was self aware? What if a random side character had full control of the universe? What if they were in space?" All of these infinite what-ifs came to life solely made by fans' desire for more of their favorite game. People started making fan works of fan works, writing stories about characters from other AUs meeting, presenting their own theories and AUs and letting things get as complicated as possible. Visiting the AU Wiki really makes you realize that Steven Hawking may have been right about black holes, there really are an infinite amount of alternate universes!

With these fan versions starting to become more popular than the original game, outsiders and beginner players often get confused on what the main message of Undertale was supposed to be. Sans isn't supposed to be a villain, he only fights against the player when and if they kill the rest of the characters. If you, the player, decide to act with violence then you become the story's villain, and the last one standing in your way doesn't want to get away without fighting back! Undertale matters to me so much because it tells this message that even the smallest choices you make can have a huge impact on the world around you, and at the end of the day it is your choice alone what you make of yourself. Undertale as a fandom taught me that people can be charming and colorful and diverse and have their own personal interpretations of things, and even if they don't understand the lesson to be learned that is not my responsibility to be in their comment section arguing with them about it. I'll sit back and read my Mettaton fanfiction while they giggle and watch their UnderFell Sans comic dubs.

Works Cited:

Sascha Stone's *"Summer of the Shark" (Netflix Voir Series, Episode 1)*

The Hulk TV Series (1977-1982): An Appreciation

Evan Dorkin's '*Eltingville Club'* Comic Series & Animated pilot

[Undertale AU Fanon Wiki](#)