

“Know the Difference”: A Comparison of Community-Led Erotic Knowledge Organization

Abstract

This paper describes emergent research comparing the classification practices among two online platforms for creative and erotic works: Archive of Our Own (AO3; archiveofourown.org), an expansive fan-run repository for transformative works like fanfiction, and E-Hentai (EH), a platform that hosts (pirated) sexually explicit hentai manga (i.e. traditionally published and distributed erotic graphic novels) alongside *doujinshi* (a Japanese word meaning “self-published works,” here referring to largely erotic/pornographic material). Using phonetic analysis, we examine these platforms’ tagging guidelines as well as a selection of tags used by both platforms to explore the structures of their differing folksonomies and the abilities they afford authors and/or community members to articulate expressions of gender, sex, sexuality, and (in)human bodies.

1.0 Introduction

This paper describes emergent research examining the classification practices in two online platforms for creative and erotic works: Archive of Our Own (AO3; archiveofourown.org), an expansive fan-run repository for transformative works like fanfiction, and E-Hentai (EH), a platform that hosts (pirated) sexually explicit hentai manga (i.e. traditionally published and distributed erotic graphic novels) alongside *doujinshi* (a Japanese word meaning “self-published works,” here referring to largely erotic/pornographic material). Specifically, we take interest in the unique Knowledge Organization Systems (KOSes) utilized by these two repositories. Although we are aware of the heated reply (Hjørland and Nicolaisen 2003), reply (Beghtol 2004), rejoinder (Nicolaisen and Hjørland 2004, and further debate (Jacob 2010) over “naïve classification” (Beghtol 2003), this work (perhaps naïvely) considers these KOSes as naïve classifications (systems designed by individuals/groups/communities “who have no particular interest in studying classification as an end in itself;” Beghtol 2003, 64) in order to consider the warrants, tools, and unique strategies they utilize when compared to traditional KOSes. The first author of this paper has written elsewhere (Nelson & Bullard, forthcoming) of the many ways that authors on AO3 use qualifying tags to expand or negotiate ideas expressed in pre/proceeding tags, especially to develop fan-specific tropes or genres. Likewise, the second author of this paper has written elsewhere (Watson 2021) about how community-designed systems may represent their subjects in a less dehumanizing ways than traditional systems (e.g. ‘mainstream’ porn sites; Keilty 2012). The present investigation may be seen as an extension of these works.

In the below sections, we examine the extensive tagging guidelines for AO3 and EH, as well as a selection of overlapping tags utilized by both platforms. Here, we consider the tags ‘body swap’ and ‘netorare/netorase’ to explore the structures of these differing folksonomies and the abilities they afford authors and/or community members to articulate expressions of gender, sex, sexuality, and bodies in ways that traditional KOSes do not. In our conclusion, we speculate on ways that these community-developed and maintained terms and their re-use could translate to traditional library settings and KOSes.

2.0 Background

Our study is concerned with two community-run platforms for creative and erotic works. The first, Archive of Our Own (AO3), is a "fan-created, fan-run, nonprofit, noncommercial archive for transformative fanworks" hosted by the Organization for Transformative Works (*Home | Archive of Our Own*, n.d.). On AO3, works are described using a series of set tag fields (Rating, Archive Warning, Fandom, Characters, Relationships) as well as freeform tags, which may be canonized by so-called volunteer "tag wranglers" who connect frequently used freeform tags to established metatags, like a specific fandom or relationship in a system Bullard (2014) describes as a *curated folksonomy*. An important caveat to this system is that although the wranglers canonize (i.e., standardize) tags to improve search and retrieval, the author's original words are not removed in the process. In other words, the original wording of tags remains visible to both author and reader. For example, the author-created tags "a body swap with a twist" and "attempted body swap" are wrangled in the backend to the canonized term "Body Swap." There is a vast body of scholarship on transformative works like fanfiction, including work specifically focused on AO3's KOS and the ways that different kinds of users engage with it. However, less work has looked at AO3's KOS in comparison to those used by other platforms or with a specific focus on erotic terminology.

Our second platform, E-Hentai (EH) has no extant scholarly literature. EH encompasses a suite of sites, including 1. the main repository at e-hentai.org (*caution*: URL leads to pornographic material); 2. Hentai@Home, a project that "can be compared to a cross between the SETI@home project and BitTorrent"; 3. the HentaiVerse (hentaiverse.org; *caution*: URL leads to pornographic material) a browser-based monster-fighting game where players fight monsters in order to gain "credits" which can be redeemed for (intangible) in-game benefits or for the semi-tangible reward of additional downloads from the sitewide repository; and finally, 4. EHWiki (ehwiki.org), the community-run knowledgebase which this study focuses upon. EHWiki serves as a guidance to the mechanics and structure of tagging on the EH platform and provides a list of available tags and their usage to authors and community members (*Fetish Listing - EHWiki*, n.d.).

3.0 Method

AO3 and EH each provide extensive documentation for how tags are used on their respective platforms. In the case of AO3, this exists in a series of guidelines for tag wranglers—volunteers who 'wrangle' unique tags applied by authors of fan works—to improve searchability within the site by creating hierarchical associations between tags, reducing redundancies, and addressing polysemy. In the case of EH, a Wiki houses documentation for the authors of images or image galleries to direct the appropriate application of tags and to encourage community members to address incorrect tag usage.

To analyse this data, we saved copies of each platform's high-level documentation to a shared OneNote notebook for coding. We identified a total of 8 AO3 tag-wrangler documents and 16 guidance pages on EHWiki for uploaders and community members.

Our study utilized Tracy's (2018) phronetic iterative analysis, which encourages researchers to alternate (iterate) between the emic (examining emergent qualitative findings) and etic (consulting existing literature/theories) aspects of their data. According to Tracy, these inductive-to-deductive-and-back-again cycles engage in *abduction*,

allowing hypotheses to evolve through engagement with the field. Our approach to the coding was guided by these three questions:

- 1) How does the KO system function?
- 2) Who has authority to make decisions within the KO system?
- 3) How does the KO system explicitly or implicitly enable or constrain user expression?

Given time and space constraints, in the remainder of this paper, we will discuss our exploration of the tags ‘body swap’ and ‘netorare/netorase’ on AO3 and EH respectively. These tags were identified through the aforementioned documentation on EHWiki and selected as a starting point for this study due to lower usage on AO3. EH documentation for each tag was copied to a shared OneNote notebook for analysis (i.e., tag guidelines and related tags), and a search for each tag was conducted on AO3 using their tag search function.

3.2 AO3

AO3’s tag wrangling guidelines are publicly available through the About menu tab on the main site (https://archiveofourown.org/wrangling_guidelines). The guidelines are broken down into 8 sections: Intro and General Concepts, Fandoms, Characters, Relationships, Additional Tags (Freeforms), Metatags, Guideline Development Principles, and Work Description. For this study, we did not include the Work Description section in our analysis, as it functions as more of a FAQ for people interested in volunteering with AO3 than as guidance for tagging on the site. Thus, our sample from AO3 included 7 documents.

3.3 EH

EH’s tagging guidelines are publicly available through “Gallery Tagging” (n.d.) and “Tagging Mechanics” (n.d.) subpages of EHWiki and the tags themselves are defined on the Wiki’s “Fetish Listing” (n.d.) subpages. The high-level navigation for the Wiki includes 8 guidelines: Power, Tagging, Mechanics, Fetish Listing, My Tags, Tag Creation, Renaming, and Expunging. Through our exploration of the Wiki, we identified 8 additional guidelines: Gallery Categories, Incomplete, Missing Cover, Out of Order, Rewards, Toplists, Bans, Series Segregation, Technical Issues, Know the Difference, Language, and a ‘Talk’ page which provides additional information for Gallery Tagging. Our total sample from EHWiki included 16 documents.

4.0. Findings & Discussion

4.1. System Function

4.1.1 AO3

Within AO3, authors assign tags in set fields (e.g., Fandom, Warning) as well as in a freeform/additional tags space. Volunteer tag wranglers are guided to canonize both kinds of tags, as well as to assign relationships between sub-tags and metatags for freeform tags. Canonical tags are “master (tags) for a group of synonyms,” which “appear in the auto-complete and the filters” on AO3 (*Intro and General Concepts*, n.d.). These tags are set by wranglers and connected to their variants, described as synonyms or *syns*

(*Intro and General Concepts*, n.d.). In the case of freeform tags, wranglers develop canonical metatags “to group together similar but not synonymous terms,” and subtags, which are canonical tags “with a metatag over it” (*Intro and General Concepts*, n.d.). This structure allows creators to create nuanced tags without compromising the retrievability their works.

4.1.2. EH

Within EH, tags provide progressively infinitesimal classification unavailable on many other community-run erotic platforms, with the notable exception of AO3. However, unlike AO3's curated folksonomy (Bullard, 2014) model, EH operates with a more structured folksonomy wherein users can propose and provide justification for new tags. Proposed tags are subject to community vote; as votes accumulate, tags achieve ‘mod power,’ which dictates the attributes available for a given tag, as well as tags’ searchability within the EH ecosystem (Tagging Mechanics - EHWiki, n.d.). Similarly, participation in EH—for instance, ranking the accuracy of an assigned tag—allows users to accumulate voting power thereby incentivizing participation in community knowledge organization.

Once a tag achieves sufficient mod power, its purpose, related and conflicting tags, and any other relevant properties are defined through the EHWiki. Tags which label complicated sexual or romantic dynamics like netorare (a specific form of infidelity; see Netorare - EHWiki, n.d.) include flowcharts to help users determine whether the tag is appropriate for a work, not dissimilar from flowcharts used by the Dewey Decimal Classification System (for example, Melvil 2011, p. 782).

Figure 1: DDC 23's flow chart for vocal music.

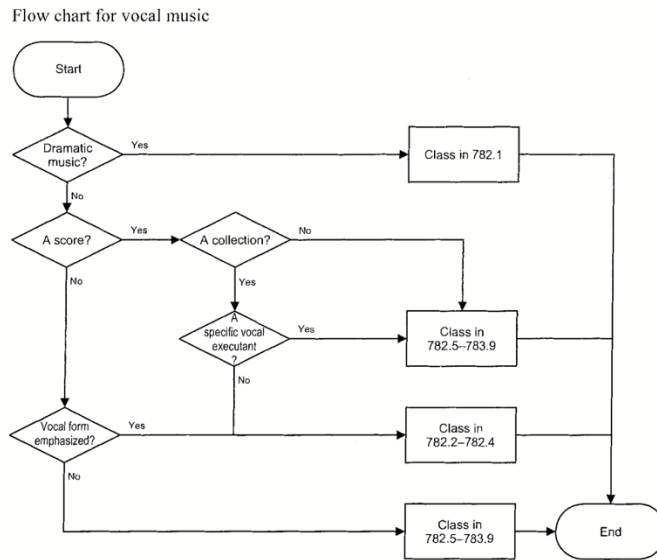
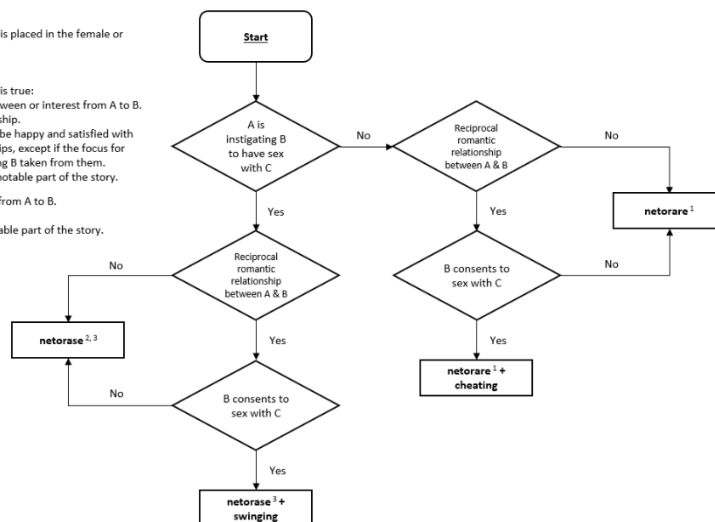


Figure 2: EHWiki's flow chart for distinguishing between cheating, *netorare*, *netorase*, and swinging. Focuses on hypothetical relationship between A, B, and C where 1. there is a friendly/familiar relationship between A&B, and 2. B has sex with a third-party, C. If A does not consent and is not aware of it, it is considered *netorare*. If A is aware, consents to, and/or instigates it, it is *netorase*. Depending on story elements involving B&C, the *netorare* may also include the 'cheating' tag, whereas *netorase* may also include the 'swinging' tag.

Namespace Rule:
The gender of B determines if the tag(s) is placed in the female or male namespace

Notes:
¹ Does **NOT** apply if any of the following is true:
 > Lack of any romantic relationship between or interest from A to B. It is merely a sexual interest/relationship.
 > All parties (A, B, and C) are shown to be happy and satisfied with the resulting polyamorous relationships, except if the focus for the majority of the work is on A having B taken from them.
 > B being taken away from A is **NOT** a notable part of the story.
² Requires a romantic or sexual interest from A to B.
³ B being given away by A must be a notable part of the story.



Tags are also regulated by ‘presence’ which serves a similar function to warrant and indicates the representativeness of a tag to the content of a gallery. Like proposing or voting for tags, EH users are also encouraged to evaluate tags’ presence and modify or remove tags, as necessary (*Talk:Gallery Tagging - EHWiki*, n.d.).

Finally, certain tags can be modified through a ‘namespace’, for example ‘m.’ or ‘f.’, to indicate a character’s sex, so a search for “m:glasses” with other Boolean search operators would indicate the presence (or absence) of a male wearing glasses.

4.2. Authority

4.2.1. AO3

Within Ao3’s guidelines, wranglers are often reminded that their role is to improve searchability within the platform by carefully and thoughtfully standardizing and synonymizing tags. The introductory guideline, for instance, addresses creators and bookmarkers, noting that they can use “whatever tags [they] think fit best” while wranglers are reminded that “different fandoms (and people) organize information about their fandoms differently” (*Intro and General Concepts*, n.d.). Generally, wranglers are guided to abide by the “Rule of 3”: tags must be used three times, by three different authors before they are subject to canonization, though this can vary some depending on the size of the fandom (*Additional Tags (Freeforms)*, n.d.). How tags are canonized may come from a fandom’s source material, the most common forms or usage by fans, or to acknowledge fanon (i.e., fan canon); regardless, wranglers are reminded to “respect the distinctions users are making with their tags” and not to “syn the specific to the general, because that erases the nuances the users intended with their tags” (*Guideline Development Principles*, n.d.).

Within Ao3, then, authority takes several forms: the ability to assign tags, to synonymize or canonize tags, and to influence how those tags should be standardized. This latter form of authority, in particular, highlights the consensus building required to make AO3’s KO system function, and the different ways that consensus manifests (i.e., from source canon or fan[dom]s).

4.2.2. EH:

Where AO3’s folksonomy operates with a sort of freeflowing consensus-building, EH gamifies, democratizes, and incentivizes consensus-building. There is a complex system involved in accumulating EH power and rewards, which includes proposing and voting for tags, reporting or removing inaccurate tags, expunging works (i.e., voting to remove a work), and applying tags. However, the EHWiki notes in several guidelines that attempting *to* accumulate mod power for the sole purpose of reaping the benefits of mod power is discouraged and may lead to a ban (e.g., *Power - EHWiki*, n.d.).

This system is coupled with strict guidance about how tags should or should not be used. The guideline, aptly titled Know the Difference (n.d.), for example, details

frequently misused tags and their applications—for example, drawing clear boundaries between ‘big,’ ‘huge,’ or ‘gigantic’ breasts. Both authors and community members are therefore encouraged to become familiar with each available tag and its appropriate usage to accumulate the requisite power to engage with the EH community.

4.3 Erotic expression

4.3.1 AO3

AO3’s wrangling guidelines cover a multitude of ways that creators might choose to engage in erotic description. The Relationships guideline (*Relationships*, n.d.) for example, describes how to wrangle tags depicting threesomes and moresomes; romantic and/or sexual relationships; relationships involving different versions of characters (e.g., alternate universes), multiple versions of a single character (e.g., alter egos), or a single character with their self (e.g., clonecest); or relationships with objects, creators, readers, or mystery characters. There is also guidance to handle the distinction between kink and play alongside guidance for tags that are “being used ambiguously or [which] are being used in different ambiguities (such as animal play or animal-human hybrids)” (*Additional Tags (Freeforms)*, n.d.).

The Additional Tags guideline, in particular, emphasizes AO3’s principle of user-centricity. It notes that “[as] wranglers, we value diversity in fannish language and usage, and we support users expressing exactly what they feel is important about their works”, and specifically instructs wranglers not to synonymize tags dealing with identities or tags that are specific to tags that are general (n.d.). This principle is demonstrated in our examination of tags using the terms ‘body swap’ or ‘netorare’. Here, the canonical tag “Body Swap” is used by 5419 fanworks, but it exists alongside many more elaborate and infrequently used freeform tags explaining specifics of the body swap (e.g., “Alec Lightwood/Valentine Morgenstern (Body Swap)”; “what if they body swap when they’re having sex’ I said to myself”). Likewise, “Netorare” is used by 1474 works, but more granular tags like “Netorare (depending on how you tilt your head and squint your eyes)”, “this is not netorare but it’s also not not netorare”, or “impregnation netorare” offer readers greater insight into how this dynamic manifests in the work.

4.3.1.2 EH

Contrary to the user-centric guidelines in AO3, EH closely prescribes how bodies can be described in works. The guidelines (particularly the Fetish Listing) define available terminology, and clicking into each term defines its appropriate usage. The Body Swap tag, for instance, is defined as “[switching] bodies with another participant,” which “[should] **not** be confused with possession” (*Body Swap - EHWiki*, n.d.). Similarly, netorare (*Netorare - EHWiki*, n.d.) is listed as a Contextual Infidelity tag, the specifics of which are mapped out through a flowchart to help users determine whether a work depicts this specific form of infidelity (see figure 2). Another notable example from the Talk: Gallery Tagging page (n.d.) explains that “[in] any cases of total gender ambiguity (no visual or contextual cues) all tagging defaults to hetero-normative. Solo participants default to female”. Despite the range of representation of sexual acts and types of bodies (e.g., aliens, mechanical creatures) within the guidelines and EH platform—and unlike

AO3's model—there are still ways that certain bodies are subjected to conformity through the tagging process.

5.0. Limitations, Conclusions & Future Work

5.1. Limitations

Due to space and time constraints, we have only examined two tags here. However, our preliminary research found substantial parallelism between AO3 and EH tags, despite the differences in how tag usage is negotiated and applied. It is also possible that by limiting our investigations to the largest fanfiction and manga/doujinshi repositories that we have ignored, eluded, or missed a more influential platform or community, though this is unlikely, given the authors' experience in studying these communities. It is also worth noting that AO3 is predominantly a text-based archive for *transformative* works, while EH's focus is on visual (pirated) *original* works. These differences in medium and canonicity and their relationship to the platforms' KOSes may be an area for further enquiry.

5.2. Future Work

Through the investigation we have undertaken, we do not aim to suggest that GLAMS should largescale adopt KOSes similar to AO3 or EH, nor are we particularly interested in reopening another front in the early aughts debates about the inclusion of public tagging/folksonomies in GLAMS systems. However, we believe that these so-called “naïve classifications” can provide creative solutions, insights, and terminology that designers of or contributors to GLAMS KOSes might make use of, particularly in the context of erotic expression. For example, in interviews with cataloguers in another project, the second author of this paper (Watson, forthcoming) received several independent suggestions that terms adapted from Tumblr or AO3 (such as “love triangles”, “only one bed”, or “hurt and comfort”) would make excellent subject headings.

5.3. Conclusion

Though the media represented in AO3 and EH are different (i.e., written versus visual works), many of the descriptive tags are shared by both platforms and reused by and on other platforms or repositories such as fanfiction.net/WattPad (AO3) and hentai2read or nhentai (EH), and users/creators who circulate between these communities create terminological feedback loops and identity recirculation. Though it is an early report, our discussion here extended Keilty (2013) and Watson's (2020) studies from one to multiple communities and has provided a mechanism for which further work may be done.

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