

How does A03 function as a community archive and what can we learn from this understanding of the platform?

Introduction to AO3

Archive of Our Own (AO3) is a digital archive that houses fanworks. The platform is a project run by the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) and as of August 2025, hosts more than **15.5 million works and 8.9 million users**.

In thinking about AO3 as a community archive, we recognize the work of archiving fanworks as a valuable cultural practice and interrogate where the platform and more traditional archival institutions can learn from each other.

Community Archives

Community archives represent a deviation in traditional archiving practices, focusing on the history and culture of a community and centering the people of that community in their work. **The power of seeing oneself and one’s history depicted and respected in an institutional space can be powerful, especially marginalized populations** (Caswell, 2020).

Liberatory memory work allows community archives to represent their own understanding of time and their history to push back against dominant narratives and hierarchies (UCLA Community Archives Lab, n.d.).

Participatory archiving allows community members to work with archivists and historians to document their community history and build an archive. Community members learn archival practices to create a record of their activities as a group (“What is Participatory Archiving?”, n.d.).

Fandom as Community (ctd.)



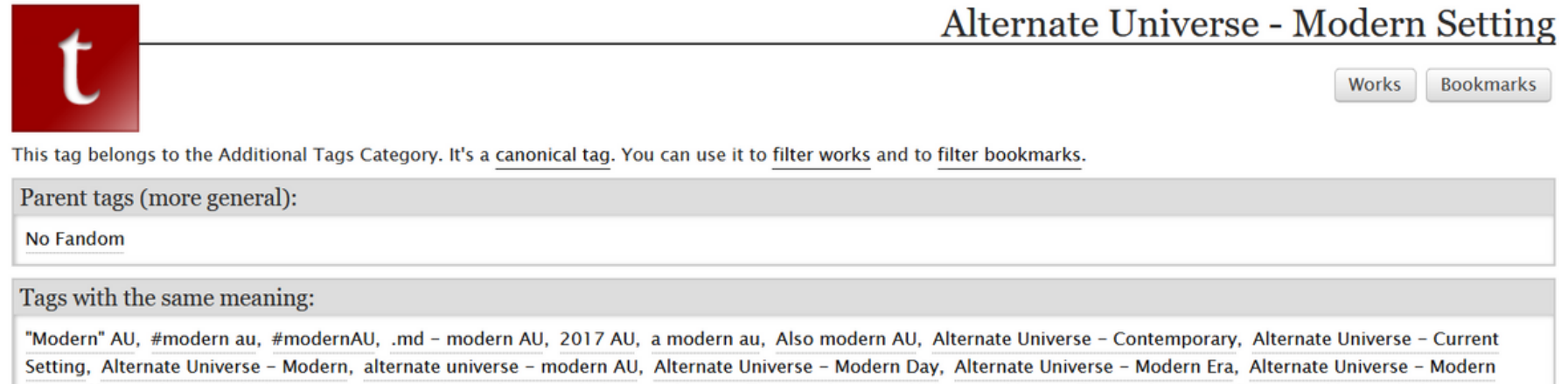
If AO3 is a community archive, fandom is their community. Unlike the communities represented by most community archives, however, fandom is a massive, sprawling thing, spanning millions of people, from all over the world.

A recent unofficial study of the site’s demographics highlights the diversity of such a large population. Notably, many of AO3's users are queer, neurodiverse, female, and do not speak English as a first language (centreoftheselights, 1 Dec. 2024). Also of note in the survey’s findings is the lack of racial diversity. This highlights an ongoing struggle against racism for AO3 and fandom as a whole.

Users as Archivists

One of the most unique features of AO3 as an archive is its **user-generated tagging practices**. AO3's users are the site’s archivists. They are responsible for the creation and continuation of their history. It is organized for the community, by the community, in true participatory archiving practice.

Users’ personalized tags are balanced with the site’s administrative practices. Volunteer tag wranglers work to group commonly used tags together into canonical tags. Canonical tags can be searched for and filtered from search results, allowing users to impact the design and functionality of the site built to serve them.



Learning From the Archive

AO3 integrates users into archival work **through the formatting of the website**, a callback to earlier days of the Internet’s Do-It-Yourself aesthetic. Users can navigate the site using tags and a search engine. Posting directs them to a form for filling in the necessary and applicable metadata. This collaborative practice allows the Archive to fulfill its namesake, by becoming an archive created and defined by its users.

Many community archives face difficulties digitizing their works and connecting with their community online (Caswell, 2018). Traditional archives also have trouble **recruiting members of marginalized communities as users or organizational members**. AO3 is naturally more diverse though there are ways that the organization could become more inclusive.

Conclusion

AO3 is not a perfect platform or a static entity, rather it is **perpetually in beta**; making changes, fixing bugs, and adapting to the needs of their community. One crucial area of improvement lies in the platform’s inclusion of black users, listening to their needs and making changes to improve their experience on the platform (Lothian & Stanfill, 2022).

By examining AO3 as a community archive, we can better understand the benefits of representation, active participation, and adaptability in archival spaces. Traditional archival spaces can benefit not just from the reach and flexibility of digital curation but the interaction between the institution and the people whose histories and futures they record.