**disabled!**

Olivia Dreisinger, Department of English Literature
McGill University
oliviadreisinger@gmail.com

**Abstract**: Join River Tam on a tour through the many worlds of fan fiction and disability in the experimental audio-visual essay *disabled*!

**Keywords:** fanfiction; fan art; chronic illness; 3D animation

### 1.  I was unhappy

The film *disabled!* grew out of a period of increasing unhappiness during my graduate studies. During my first year, my chronic illnesses were becoming more permanent and less episodic. Without an official diagnosis in hand, there was very little my university could offer me in terms of accommodations or access to resources. Away from home and lacking access to proper healthcare, I also wasn't going to get a diagnosis anytime soon. As each semester continued, it became clear that my department, too, was ill-equipped to handle a sick student; I could barely make it to campus most days, and professors repeatedly threatened to fail me out of their courses. I thought about exiting the program, feeling pushed out and unsupported by the university.

Around this time, I returned to an old interest of mine—the *Twilight* franchise. Returning to young adult literature also led me back to other non-canonical fiction and forms I had been interested in as a youth. I began reading *Twilight* fanfiction, looking at fan art, and watching fan videos. I reread one fanfic in particular, a femslash fic where Bella Swan is torn between her feelings for Edward Cullen, and her new feelings for a girl with cerebral palsy. From there, I

began to actively search for depictions of disability within the *Twilight* fandom, and in other fan

spaces.
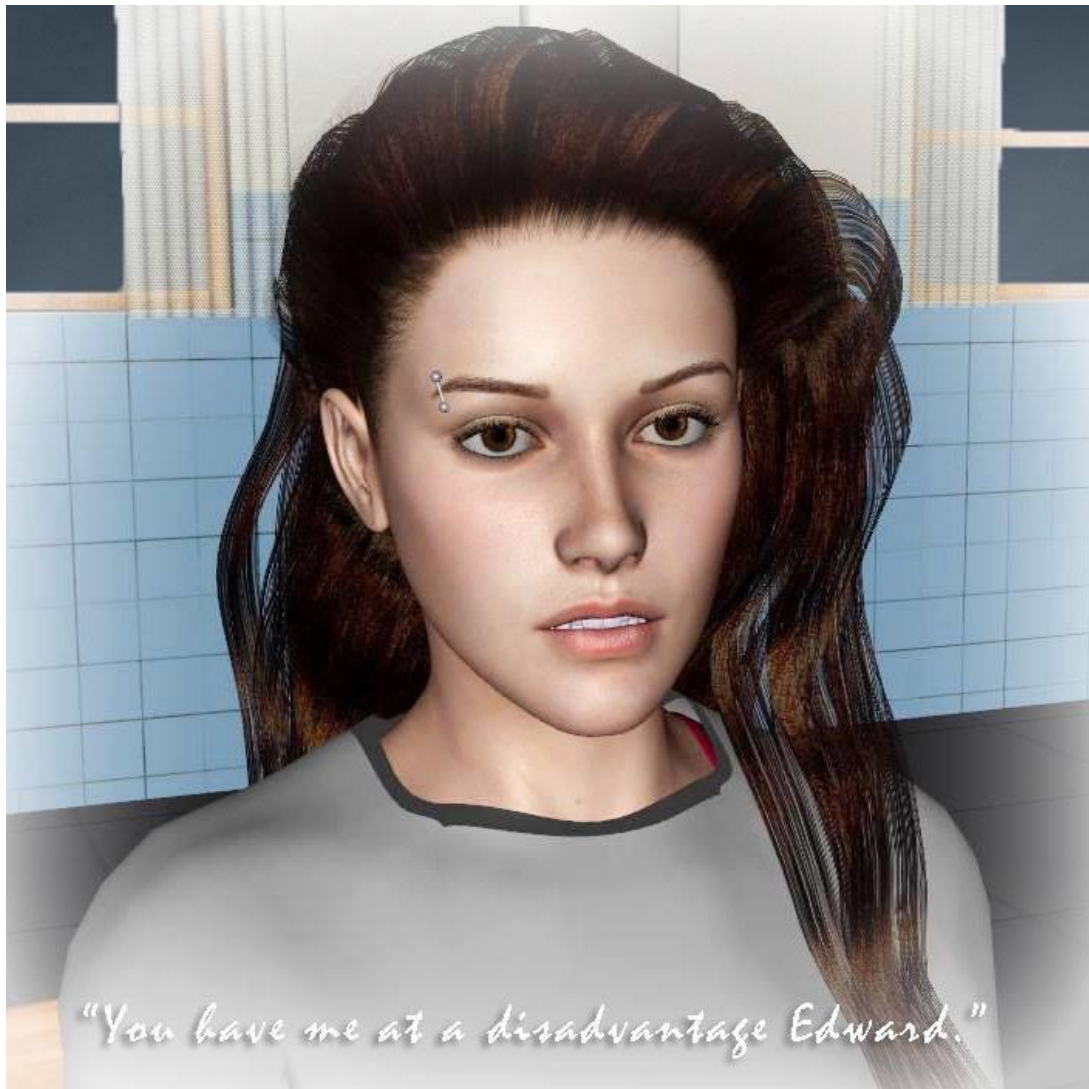


*Figure 1. Bella with an eyebrow piercing,* **my first attempt at *Twilight* fan art.**

**Image description: This is a 3D animated portrait of Bella Swan. Bella has long dark brown hair, brown eyes, and an eyebrow piercing. She is wearing a light grey shirt and is sitting against a blue tiled wall. Her mouth is slightly open, her eyes dreamy and staring beyond the image. "You have me at a disadvantage Edward" is written at the bottom of the image.**

Most of my professors and fellow classmates were entirely unfamiliar with what fanfiction was, let alone what role disability had within fanfiction. I switched my research focus and set out to change this. I began drafting thesis proposals, and petitioned my department to allow me to produce an audio-visual essay in lieu of a more traditional written thesis. I wanted to move away from purely textual formats, and towards a medium that could live and move beyond the university. Additionally, I wanted to make something that was more accessible to a nonacademic audience and to work towards deinstitutionalizing my own knowledge, language, and methodologies. Lastly, it was important that people could access the film freely through common video-sharing platforms, such as YouTube. After spending more time in animation communities, I began noticing clear crossovers between amateur animators and fanfic writers in terms of skill level, aesthetics, and values. Accessible communities prioritized making and offering accessible content to other members.

## 2. Learning to animate

Up until this point, I had never touched animation software—nor had I ever made a film. After researching animation programs, I downloaded Daz3D, and soon after moved on to the cross-compatible program Poser. The latter is relatively user friendly, allowing me to pick it up without prior animation experience.

For the first few months, I watched online tutorials and read through various user forums. It was important for me to remain working at an amateur and, at times, derivative level in order to align myself more authentically with fannish practices. As well, an amateur production quality allowed me greater freedom to incorporate my mistakes into the final edit and to keep things that

were a bit off, matching the material that I was directly engaging with. Poser also possesses an

active community that offers free tech support and free 3D assets, furthering its viability as the

ideal animation software for me to use.

While building my library of 3D assets, collecting everything from jeans to shrubbery to

ships from *Star Trek*, I came across a free fanmade avatar of River Tam from Joss Whedon's

television show *Firefly*: "here," I thought, "is my narrator." River is a non-visibly disabled

character and served as a good stand-in for my own imperceptibly unwell body. By taking up the

figure of River Tam, I could situate myself within the fan universe, adopting a fannish process of

making and storytelling.



*Figure 2.* **Narrators River Tam and Olivia Dreisinger.**

**Image description: This is a photograph of the artist Olivia Dreisinger and the 3D rendered narrator of her film, River Tam. The two stand side by side to the left of the image against a green backdrop, mirroring one another's poses with crossed arms. They**

**are smiling at one another. River has long brown hair and is wearing a green dress. Olivia has short purple hair and is wearing a long sleeve white blouse, a blue medieval corset, and light blue jeans. There is a computer station in the right hand corner of the image.**

### 3. Fannish love and labor

Fannish labour holds together both the fanfic and amateur animation community. Fannish labour is inherently unpaid labour, a "labour of love," as some academic-fans have called it (Flegel and Roth 1093). Fan communities have an established history of utilizing non-hierarchical models of information sharing, knowledge acquisition, and artistic practices. They're horizontal, communal and collaborative. The fanfic community, for instance, is made up of different members: content producers, moderators, beta reviewers, and readers, collectively working to write and review stories. Everyone is needed in this process, and everyone is simultaneously contributing a great deal of labour, whilst gaining individual experience. For instance, reviewers gain skills in editing, content producers gain skills in writing, and readers become more literate. I see this kind of labour as well in the disability community. Disability communities have to collectively come up with new ways to survive, or adapt, as there are so few resources for us to fall back on. We have to be resourceful, especially when most of the work we carry out is unpaid or underpaid. We pay ourselves in experience, or pay our communities by building them up.
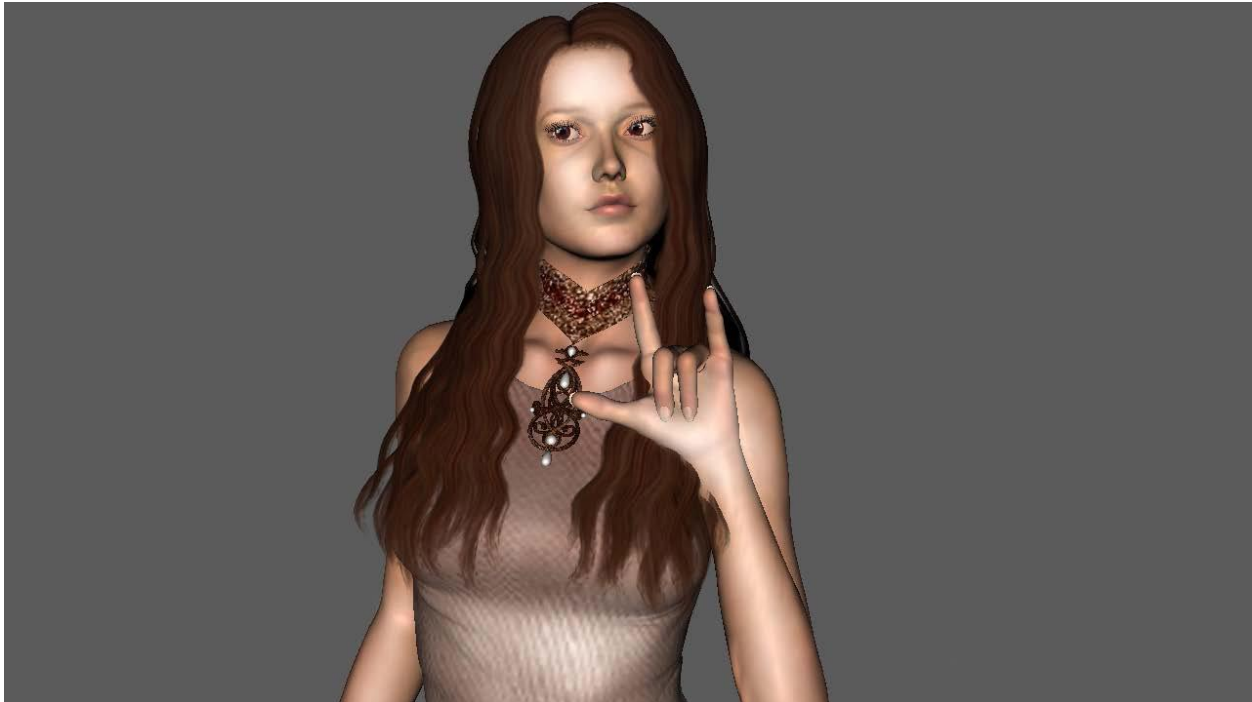
*Figure 3.* **River signs "I love you." Testing out a fanmade American Sign Language (ASL) pose pack.**

**Image description: This is a 3D rendered image of River Tam. She has long brown hair and is wearing a mauve top with an ornate choker. Her left hand is signing "I love you" as she looks off slightly to the left of the image. The background is dark grey.**

Since the film was part of my academic labour, I paid myself in academic standing. The film became an investment into my future as a scholar. I bought computer equipment and film editing software to get me started. Building up my film universe was relatively affordable since members of the Poser community offered free 3D assets. I purchased a few additional assets, spending a small sum on Bella Swan and Edward Cullen custom models, and dresses for River Tam.

*Figure 4.* **River's first outfit, later to be rejected.**

**Image description: This is a 3D rendered image of River Tam. She has long brown hair and is wearing a mauve top with long flowy brown sleeves, a brown skirt, and an ornate choker. She stands with her hands out to the side as she looks off to the left of the image.**

## 4. Final results, possible futures

The film took around five months to complete. I worked every day on it, often for eight to ten hours a day. My computer could only render two seconds of animation every hour, which stretched the film's production time considerably. These technical setbacks allowed me more break time, more time to rest and sit with what, exactly, I was making, and more time to get through my own unpredictable physical setbacks and flare ups.



abandoned at dusk by faerie foot (@faeriefoot) ~ Complete
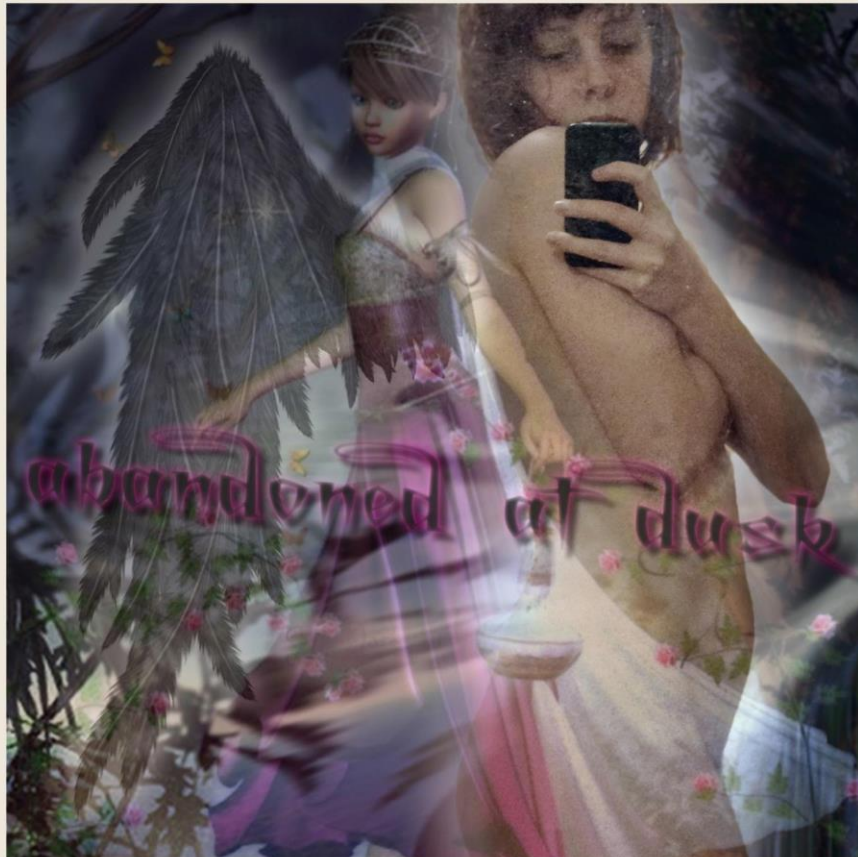
Summary: A young girl uncertain of her future, her past a painful memory. An enchanted encounter reminds her of the things she has lost and the things she might still be able to regain. But what more will she have to give up to remember who she was and who she can become?

**Figure 5. *abandoned at dusk*, a mock fanfic study.**

**Image description: This is a digital image. The text at the top of the image reads, "abandoned at dusk by faerie foot (@faeriefoot) ~ Complete." Below the text is a digital collage of a naked white woman and a 3D rendered fairy princess. The two stand back to back, slightly overlapping and almost merging into one another. A pair of black wings emerge from their bodies. "abandoned at dusk" is written in a black and purple gothic font. The text at the bottom of the image reads, "Summary: A young girl uncertain of her future, her past a painful memory. An enchanted encounter reminds her of the things she has lost and the things she might still be able to regain. But what more will she have to give up to remember who she was and who she can become?"**

Overall, throughout this process, I wanted to know if there were other ways of living—of being, as an academic, a fan, and a chronically ill woman. This wanting to know is at the heart of fanfiction too, as fanfiction imagines how things could have played out differently in a separate and particular fan universe. New storylines are introduced, or old storylines are reworked. Non-canon relationships are formed. How then could my own disability play out in my own universe? What possible futures were before me? Reading disabled fanfic provided me with more options, more narratives to run with, more room to open up my own unimaginative understanding of illness.

**Works Cited**

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