

Włodarczyk, A., Tymińska, M. (2015). Cultural differences: Polish fandom of *Welcome to Night Vale*, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, Vol. 19, <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/591/490>.

Cultural differences: Polish fandom of *Welcome to Night Vale*

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[0.1] Abstract—*Welcome to Night Vale* (2012–) is an intertextual podcast in the tradition of popular horror and weird tales. Listeners are meant to be part of a (fictional) community, listening to the radio in the small desert town of Night Vale in the Southwestern United States, although neither the state nor the exact time are specified. We follow the host of the program, Cecil Palmer, as he describes the town's community life, although the events presented in the show are far from normal. The first episode was published online June 15, 2012, with no marketing to accompany the event. Many had first heard about *Welcome to Night Vale* through fan art available via social media, including Tumblr, Soup.io, blog communities, Facebook groups, and deviantArt. Although the production is available in English only, it has a Polish fandom. We describe the difference in perception of this popular text based on differences in the cultural background and literary knowledge of the listeners. We also attend to fan practices such as fan art surrounding *Welcome to Night Vale* because their content correlates with the creator's culture of origin, as well as the issue of funding the free podcast among fans from different countries and different economies.

[0.2] Keywords—Audio drama; Fan art; Podcast; Reading practices; Visualization; Weird tales

Włodarczyk, Agata, and Marta Tyminska. "Cultural Differences: Polish Fandom of *Welcome to Night Vale*." 2015. In "European Fans and European Fan Objects: Localization and Translation," edited by Anne Kustritz, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0591>.

1. The *Welcome to Night Vale* phenomenon

[1.1] Recently a new fandom has emerged to join the big names: that of bimonthly podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012–), written by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor (Romano 2013). The podcast has gathered many listeners all around the globe in part because it is a self-produced, free production. It topped the iTunes podcast charts in 2013 (Romano 2013), and as of February 15, 2015, it remains in the top 20 most popular podcasts, regardless of genre, in the United States and the United Kingdom. The podcast is in the form of a radio show, with elements such as news, announcements, and weather forecasts. It is set in a peculiar small town located in the desert, somewhere in the American Southwest. What sets this text apart from others is the fact that Fink and Cranor created a city where all conspiracy theories are true and the level of eeriness is high (D'Amico 2013). The sheriff's secret police, the cat suspended in the air, and angel interferences are commonplace in Night Vale. The city has

been described as a place of "surreal horror" and its citizens as "members of the Addams Family" (Baker-Withelaw 2013). The story's narrative includes paranoia, black comedy, Lovecraftian worlds, and irony (figure 1).



Figure 1. Official *Welcome to Night Vale* Facebook status, January 30, 2014. [[View larger image.](#)]

[1.2] In 2013 the show extended its formula to include live shows, which were held exclusively in the United States, creating a situation in which fans who reside outside of the United States are excluded from an important experience related to the *Night Vale* text, although the live shows are recorded and available for download. In 2014, *Welcome to Night Vale* live shows toured Europe for the first time (United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Netherlands, Denmark, France, and Germany) between October 16 and November 8, changing the fandom dynamics—although not so much for Polish fandom. Those who live outside of the text's core country are, by the very nature of the pop culture industry, underprivileged in terms of consumption of the text (Siuda 2012). Usually the exclusion is limited to event attendance and instant availability—that is, those living outside the core country have to wait longer for the copies to become obtainable. In the case of *Night Vale*, fans are excluded in another way: the text itself is densely culture specific. Thus, it is interesting that regardless of the text's various exclusions, the show's fandom is still growing in countries other than the United States.

[1.3] Media fandoms often concentrate around a visual text, such as a film or TV show. This is where *Night Vale* stands out: it has only one official logo (figure 2), which has remained unchanged since the show's release, and several merchandise-related designs. Most of the visual representations have been created by the fans themselves. As a result of its audio-only form, the most prominent feature of the show is the anchor's—Cecil Baldwin's—voice. Therefore, *Night Vale* is an unusual text to gain fan attention of this magnitude.



Figure 2. Official *Welcome to Night Vale* logo. Source: Tumblr. [[View larger image.](#)]

[1.4] We became interested in the podcast first as fans and then as academics. As fans of the podcast, we immersed ourselves in the online fandom, particularly in the Facebook group called Welcome to Night Vale Polska (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/134875500055093/?fref=ts>), and followed various Tumblrs. One of the things that struck us was the fact that ways of decoding the show in the Polish groups seemed different from the global groups gathered around Tumblr or Pinterest. Polish fans of *Welcome to Night Vale* differ from US and global fandoms in their readings and thus in their fan practices. We found it interesting that a text deeply rooted in American culture had become an object of fannish interest in Poland. We thus conducted a small sociological study among Polish fans of *Welcome to Night Vale* aiming to examine three aspects of this fandom: demographics, practices and engagement, and modes of reading.

2. The importance of reading context

[2.1] Culture is a pool of raw material individuals draw from to form their personalities and mind-sets (Benedict 2006). It provides a pattern that forms modes of conceptual (Maruszewski 2001) and linguistic (Tokarski 1993) world perception. How we think of the surrounding world and the interactions that we observe is rooted in what we learned growing up, as well as in the knowledge and experiences that were available for us to shape those patterns. The environment we grow up in shapes the neurologic pathways in the brain, meaning that the experiences of the surrounding world affect the way the brain interprets visual stimuli (Kossut 1994; Grabowska 1997). Culture has a similar influence: through socialization, culture teaches its members certain ways of interpretation, attributions of behavior, and patterns of associations. For example, Western culture is deeply rooted in reason and logic, ideas derived from ancient Greek philosophers, whereas Eastern culture is not (Boski 2009). The resulting differences can be observed in how people brought up in those cultures read a single picture and what is deemed more important, such as the center or the possible context visible in the background (Nisbett 2004). Cognitive psychologists strive to describe the ways in which the world is categorized and conceptualized (Hirschfeld and Gelman 1994; Ross and Murphy 1999), and anthropological linguists further describe the relations between grammar compounds and lexical structures that are connected with the process (Tokarski 1993). The cultural shift in the social sciences has both further complicated and simplified those studies. The generalization of results has become more difficult, as the experimental sample has to encompass cross-cultural data. On the other hand some of the discrepancies found in samples of mixed cultural background can now be explained by cultural factors. The importance of the environment and culture in which an individual grows up translates into different ways of reading because the process of understanding a text depends on a person's previous knowledge and experiences. Thus, the understanding of a text would differ not only individually (Barthes [1970] 2006) but also culturally (Burzyńska 2012). Readers growing up in a specific culture acquire different literary competences based on the texts of the indigenous culture and those that were translated and popularized in the country in question. Moreover, both global and local current events influence fiction (Boxall 2013) and the ways of reading, since both are interconnected. People living a comfortable life read fiction concerning poverty in a different manner than those who have experienced it firsthand.

[2.2] Individual reading preferences appear later in life, most probably depending on previous encounters with various genres. People choose texts they like the most from the pool of

available titles. Neurologic makeup, temperament, and personality as well as need for stimulation also take part in the process of choosing texts. However, people usually do not limit their experiences to a single genre, preferring to flirt with others out of curiosity or by recommendation. The texts they read further shape their worldview and patterns of world perception. Thus, the literary competence of an individual is a result of two overlapping influences: culture and personal preferences (Benedict 2006). Consequently, it is not surprising that most Polish *Welcome to Night Vale* fans choose certain tropes and characters to be their personal favorites, and they interpret many of the events differently than American and other global fans.

[2.3] Some texts may be universally regarded by critics as literary masterpieces; however, the way of reading them will always hold cultural bias (Douglas 1982; Boski 2009), meaning that the inherent culture of an individual influences interpretation of situations and texts. Apart from the different pool of texts that constitute the readers' cultural and individual competence, there are also important factors ingrained in the culture-specific socialization processes (Benedict 2006; Nisbett 2004). The tropes the readers recognize and identify as the most important or the most likable seem to be the key to understanding the culture-specific patterns of reading. This is why it is important to look at the way fans from peripheral countries read their favorite text.

3. Methods

[3.1] We constructed a sociological questionnaire of 21 items. All participants were informed of the aim of the study beforehand and were assured of full anonymity. The survey was conducted in Polish; all respondents' names are pseudonyms, which we assigned during data analysis. The questionnaire was distributed online via the Facebook fan group Welcome to Night Vale Polska. The group had 102 members as of January 25, 2014. The questionnaire link was also posted on the podcast official fan page. Furthermore, the link to the questionnaire was posted on the authors' Facebook walls and shared by a few participants of the study. It was also posted on a multifandom Facebook page of a popular pop culture blogger, Zwierz popkulturalny (<http://zpopk.pl>). Answers were gathered for 48 hours, which resulted in 21 completed questionnaires.

[3.2] There are methodological difficulties in terms of finding a representative study group among fans of the show because there are no means to assess the exact population complexity. Thus, for this study, we used the Facebook group members as an approximate number of the population. We used Matt Hills's (2010) proposition that the time of engagement in the fandom or in liking the show should be the indicator of whether a person is an enthusiast, fan, or cultist fan. Thus, we hypothesized that the Facebook group members can be considered cultist fans, although we are aware of two limitations to this assertion. First, the show was created two years ago, so the time of possible engagement is not lengthy. Second, it is impossible to estimate how long the members will remain in a fandom. Furthermore, we hypothesized that the number of members would more or less correspond with the actual numbers of the *Night Vale* fandom population. As such, the number of responses constitutes 20.58 percent of the Facebook group members. However, because not all cultist fans may be gathered around the Facebook group, we cross-posted the study to attempt to widen our sample, which permitted us to gather more data. We are aware that this is just an assumption and as such holds a measurement error. The small number of participants may be considered a disadvantage and the group not representative enough. However, the most important issues mentioned in the study are based not on quantitative but on qualitative data. Following

Lieberson's (1991) suggestions, we did not attempt to make any predictions or correlations because the sample size was too small to justify such interpretations. We also tried to avoid measurement errors.

[3.3] Twenty-one people filled in the questionnaire. Among them were 17 women, three men, and one person who chose the option "other" when asked to identify sex/gender (in Polish, a single word corresponds to both English terms: *pleć*). The median age for the study group was 20.5 years. We chose this estimator to avoid issues relating to the unknown population complexity. The oldest person who took part in the study was 29 years old, and the youngest was 16. These results suggest that the age distribution of *Night Vale* fans is broader than the mean suggests and may exceed the maximum and minimum reported in the study. The age distribution is presented in figure 3.

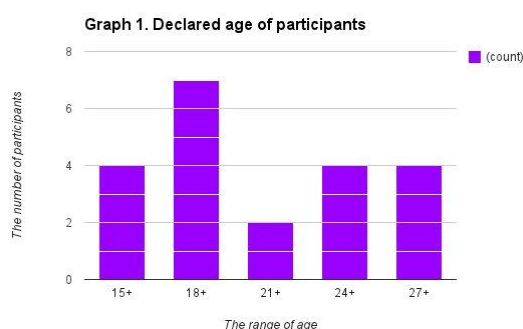


Figure 3. Graph illustrating age distribution of study population. [[View larger image.](#)]

[3.4] When asked about education, six participants stated that they held a master's degree (*wyższe—magister*), one a bachelor's degree (*wyższe—licencjat*), and three basic education (*podstawowe*). The question about completing preuniversity education resulted in some difficulties. In Poland, preuniversity education has four steps: kindergarten (*przedszkole*), elementary school (*szkoła podstawowa*), middle school (*gimnazjum*), and high school (*liceum*). Those who finish elementary school are said to have basic education (*wykształcenie podstawowe*), and when they finish middle and high school, they have middle education (*wykształcenie średnie*). Out of 21 participants, 11 reported that they had middle education, although their age suggests that they have either finished middle school, are currently studying in high school, or are high school graduates and currently working or studying.

[3.5] Using a multiple-choice question, we asked participants what foreign languages they knew. The level of proficiency was not examined, leaving that interpretation to respondents. Because *Night Vale* is in English, we were interested in the fandom's fluency in nonnative languages. We hypothesized that some of the fans of the podcast may not know English, as there are two fan projects translating *Welcome to Night Vale* into Polish. The results, however, showed that every participant knew at least one foreign language, with English known by all 21. Eighteen participants knew more than one foreign language. On average, every person knew 2.19 foreign languages. The fewest number of known languages per person was one, and the most was five. French and German were the second most often spoken languages, chosen by five respondents each. Out of 21 respondents, four stated that they knew Japanese, two Russian, and two Korean. Five other languages were known by one participant each: Spanish, Norwegian, Swedish, Chinese, and classical Latin. The results are illustrated in figure 4.

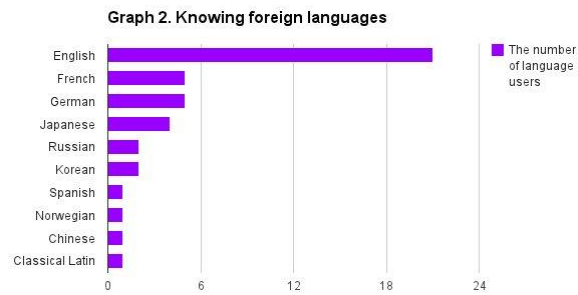


Figure 4. Graph illustrating distribution of languages spoken by the study population. [[View larger image.](#)]

4. Engagement and fan practices

[4.1] To address the level of engagement in Polish *Night Vale* fans, we considered issues such as the beginning of interest, frequency of listening, and reasons for listening. Because Poland is a peripheral country for *Night Vale* text, and one that is geographically removed from the United States, the extent of engagement varies from the global fandom. Polish fans do not attend the live shows, which are considered an integral part of the podcast text and the fandom; they can only watch the fan-made recordings on YouTube. In consequence, Polish fans of *Welcome to Night Vale* are by definition less active and have fewer possibilities for engagement. (However, some US fans face similar difficulties). The issue of engagement likely lies in perceived and/or imagined, not real and/or objective, boundaries and difficulties. It seems like there is a prevailing stereotype that any trip to the United States must be extremely difficult, complicated, and expensive—likely a notion held over from Poland's communist past, when such travel was much more expensive as well as hard to achieve for political reasons. Because of this cognitive factor blocking fan travel, fans are more liable to invent other methods of engagement. By comparing global practices in the *Night Vale* fandom with those that are undertaken by Polish fans, we can sketch a picture of the ways Polish fandom differs.

[4.2] The podcast is deeply rooted in American culture, which will be read differently by members of other cultures. Although it is not uncommon for texts to be translated into other languages to permit their consumption in different countries, they are usually distributed via official channels and prepared by professional translators, although there are thriving fan sub communities that create subtitled versions of texts such as films and TV shows. In the case of *Night Vale*, the podcast is downloaded in its originally presented format and listened to; there is no additional information or mediation provided by translators or editors. Thus, the podcast becomes a text that is read alongside other texts that provide the reader with context, or that is read in a unique way. The data obtained in this study permit us to compare *Night Vale* fans' practices in other cultures and countries, thus creating a map of complex engagement.

[4.3] The podcast had no real marketing or advertising campaign; thus, it is important to know how fans first heard about *Welcome to Night Vale*. Because it is possible that someone can find information about the podcast from multiple sources, we permitted multiple answers for the question regarding how the respondents became fans. Fifteen of 21 participants reported that they had found information about *Night Vale* on Tumblr, and five people stated that someone they knew had recommended the show. In addition, five people stated that they

found out about the podcast via different fandom channels and sources, and one noted that it had been the Fannibals (AXN's *Hannibal* [2013–] fandom) that had introduced the podcast to them. Although Facebook was used by all participants, only three people stated that it was their first point of contact with the show (figure 5). Among the other answers, one person mentioned Instagram and one the Zwierz popkulturalny blog.

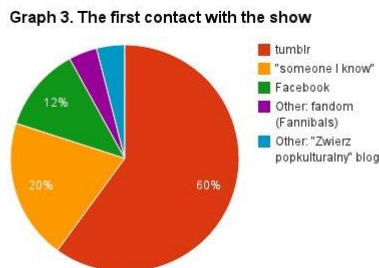


Figure 5. Graph illustrating respondents' first contact with the show. [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.4] Participants reported various sources of initial information. The global platform Tumblr was reported by the majority; nowadays, Tumblr serves as a major platform to exchange news and new trends in the fandom world. Less formal sources were also mentioned, but they were not necessarily less global. The Internet plays a major role in providing fans with information, but at the same time, opinions and recommendations are passed among fans during everyday on- and off-line conversations.

[4.5] When asked about the frequency of listening to the podcast (figure 6), seven respondents stated that they do their best to listen to the new episode as soon as it is released, and four said that they try to be as up to date with the show as they can. Among the respondents, five stated that they listen irregularly, depending on the circumstances. Five fans had not listened to all of the episodes. Four of them said that they have not listened to them yet, and one was a new fan. Thus, respondents were not all *Night Vale* experts. They are also not, as we hypothesized, cultist fans according to Hill's definition of the term. Out of 21 respondents, 10 stated that *Welcome to Night Vale* was the only podcast they listened to, while 11 habitually enjoyed other podcasts as well. When asked to name other podcasts they listened to, several titles were mentioned (figure 7). BBC 4's *Cabin Pressure* (2008–14) was mentioned seven times. We hypothesize that for some fans, the podcast sphere of fan engagement was opened by this radio show because it the cast includes Benedict Cumberbatch, who was popular among fans at the time. Fans migrate between different fandom groups as they follow their favorite stars or favorite themes. In this particular case, the format of the text—audio drama—permitted the migration.

Graph 4. The frequency of listening to WtNV

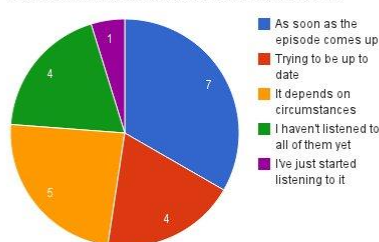


Figure 6. Graph illustrating respondents' frequency of listening to *Welcome to Night Vale*. [\[View larger image.\]](#)



Figure 7. Titles of podcasts that study participants listen to habitually. [\[View larger image.\]](#)

[4.6] One item on the questionnaire regarded the matter of reasons for listening. It was important to establish the reasons for engagement and thus examine what can make Polish citizens become fans of an American podcast. One of the reasons Polish fans listen to *Welcome to Night Vale* is the anchor's voice; nine of 21 respondents had included this argument in their answers. The anchor's voice serves as the most distinctive feature of this text, so it is important to note that the fans associate the show with his voice. Additionally, the audio nature of the podcast limits the sorts of possible hooks the creators can use to lure an audience; the visual is excluded in a strictly visual-oriented culture, which is a challenge. *Night Vale* creators overcame this obstacle by casting an actor with a voice that the study respondents described as "charming" (*czarujący*) and "brilliant" (*przecudowny*). Moreover, one of the participants, Simon, noted that when he listens to the podcast now, he feels as if he "was going back home (however sappy that sounds)" (*czuję się jakbym wracał do domu [jakkolwiek tanio to brzmi]*). Anna described the voice of *Night Vale* as soothing, "perfect to listen to before falling asleep" (*idealny do przesłuchania tuż przed snem*). Kate commented that the show helps her relax.

[4.7] Another important feature of *Welcome to Night Vale* is the humor of the show (figure 8). Seven of 21 people mentioned that they genuinely enjoyed it. The eerie plot and content of the podcast was a reason why 12 of the respondents listen to the podcast. Sara stated that she found the tropes in the script very Lovecraftian and that she greatly enjoyed it. John pointed out that the creators were able to "perfectly balance comedy and horror" (*zachowuje doskonałą równowagę między horrorem a komedią*). Samuel commented that the show was meant to be "horrorresque" by design, and the authors were able to uphold this promise in the

podcast so far. In *Night Vale*, what is uncanny or abnormal becomes normal ("Nienormalne" jest normalne), which provides the story with unexpected twists, as Anna commented. Agnes wrote that the idea of the show is "plain fantastic" (jest fantastyczny). Martha stated that for her, the podcast is "fantastically absurd, funny, disturbing, and a bit terrifying" (bo jest cudownie absurdalne, śmieszne, niepokojące i trochę przerażające). A similar stance was expressed by Hannah. Victoria was the only one who mentioned the character creations—not only Cecil and Carlos, who dominate the show, but also others whom she finds amazing.



Figure 8. An example of *Welcome to Night Vale* humor. Source: official Twitter feed. [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.8] We asked about listeners' favorite elements of the plot, a question designed to analyze the main areas of focus of Polish fans. We also wanted to gain insight into what features of the show make it so special and immersing for fans, especially Polish ones. Therefore, the question was divided into two parts: "What do you like about the show?" and "Who are your favorite characters in *Night Vale*?" The answers received were elaborate and diverse, which is why we decided to quote them at length.

[4.9] The textual quality of *Welcome to Night Vale* is hence one of the important factors that Polish fans of the podcast focus on. It is interesting, however, that they embrace the Lovecraftian angle of the script, even though the writers are not keen on H. P. Lovecraft's writings (D'Amico 2013). The conspiracy theories are not mentioned at all in the responses to this question, which may be interpreted as culture-related reading differences. In Poland, conspiracy theories are not uncommon, especially after the presidential airplane crash in 2010, but they are also not as widespread. They are rarely discussed or written about in the mainstream media, and those that are mentioned tend to have different content than those in the United States. In Poland, most of those theories are usually communist related—for example, after the airplane crash, it was believed that Stalin had planted a birch tree in order to create a situation that would result in airplane catastrophes. Polish fans may recognize a small percentage of the conspiracies in *Night Vale*, thanks to other texts imported from America, but not all of them. They do not think about *Night Vale* in terms of conspiracy theories coming true; they thus do not recognize the founding idea for their favorite podcast. What they mention most often is rooted in the podcast's textual nature, including an original narration expressed on many levels, including humor and mystery. Muriel "was pulled in by the exquisite climate" of the show (*Zaczęło się od ciekawości i możliwości szlifowania angielskiego, ale wciągnął mnie niezwykły klimat*), although she started listening because she was curious. The other aspect most often mentioned was the acting talent and the voice of the radio show's anchor. Amy said that she was "a great fan of the absurd humor and climate in which the podcast is rooted" (*jestem ogromną fanką absurdalnego humoru i klimatu w jakim prowadzony jest ten podcast*).

[4.10] Among the questions concerning what the respondents like the most in *Welcome to Night Vale*, three of 21 people mentioned the relationship between Cecil and Carlos. For Victoria, this particular element of the podcast made her interested in it. Ellen had quoted one of the show's catchphrases when describing what she liked: "Carlos's perfect hair" (*włosy Carlosa są perfekcyjne*). In contrast, for Samuel, this aspect of the plot was "fairly good," but

he observed that he became tired of the "Tumblr fan base that ignores everything except two men banging and tentacles" (Aktualnie rzygam WtNV przez fanbazę z tumbra, która olewa wszystko na rzecz ruchających się facetów i tentakli). The extent of same-sex fan art and fiction might cause Samuel to lose interest in the podcast; he struggled to find people who noticed more about the plot than just the gay romance. He does not find the slash practice disturbing, just tiresome.

[4.11] When asked about the most liked character, eight of 21 respondents chose Cecil. Victoria wrote that he is "one of the most interesting fictional characters I know. How can you not like a person who is all excited and in awe watching videos of kittens, but at the same time regards the disappearances of the interns like something completely normal?" (Jak można nie lubić osoby, która zachwyca się video z kotkami a śmierć kolejnych stażystów traktuje jak rutynę?). For John, Cecil is *Night Vale*: the anchor welcomes listeners into the uncanny city and thus is the best-known figure in this fictional universe. Cecil's romantic interest, Carlos, had fewer fans—only four respondents indicated that they liked him. However, Amy wrote that Carlos the Scientist stands in for all of the listeners who only take a brief look at the Night Vale community through the radio show and do not really live there: "He is the only one who does not understand the desert community, he is just like us" (Jako jedyny nie rozumie pustynnego społeczeństwa, jest taki jak my).

[4.12] The Faceless Old Woman That Secretly Lives In Your Home was a favorite character for five respondents. Maria stated that the character "seemed scary, but her voice convinced me to like her," and "she is closer to me" (Na początku wydawała się straszna, ale przekonał mnie do niej jej głos... Faceless Old Woman z jakiegoś powodu jest mi bliższa). The last thing we asked participants was to vote for the fictional characters in a Night Vale mayoral campaign. The Faceless Old Woman beat Hiram McDaniels and other candidates in this competition, with 12 votes.

[4.13] The character of Tamika Flynn, a 13-year-old girl, was liked by three of the respondents. She was described as courageous and brave, since, as Betty pointed out, she had defeated the most dangerous creature in the world: the librarian—though in the narrative there was more than one. Maria respects Tamika not only because she is courageous but also because she is "fantastic, strong and intelligent. And she reads books, which always counts" (Jest fantastyczna, silna i inteligentna. No i czyta książki, a to zawsze na plus). Tamika has a stocky build, she is smart if not a genius, and she is a leader of the war against the librarians. She is not a normal, stereotypical representation of a sweet 13-year-old in pink. Furthermore, because her personality and intelligence are written in opposition to what society wants a girl her age to be, she has the potential to become a role model.

[4.14] Some of the respondents claimed that they liked all the characters or could not decide on just one because it changes as they listen. The characters of any culture text enable us to explore the fictional world and get a better insight into the narrative. Most characters chosen by the fans were either the gatekeepers of the world (Cecil and Carlos), were interpreted as exceptionally weird and bizarre (Cecil and The Faceless Old Woman), or questioned the reality of the world they found themselves in (Tamika and Carlos). *Welcome to Night Vale* has at least 13 voiced characters and more than 40 recurring characters. However, listeners clearly found a group of characters more compelling than the others.

5. Funding strategies

[5.1] *Welcome to Night Vale* is a production of an independent publishing house that signs artists from all over the world. The company is funded exclusively by fan donations. Among all of Commonplace Books productions, *Welcome to Night Vale* is the most popular as of this writing. The first 12 episodes of the podcast were self-funded by the authors, but after the podcast gained popularity, the funding model was changed. In the introduction to the 12th episode, a female voice asks for positive reviews on iTunes, as it would be very helpful for the show. Information in the 14th episode informs listeners that Commonplace Books has started selling *Night Vale* merchandise, starting with T-shirts. From the 20th episode, the regular donation campaign opened, together with the podcast's creator speaking to the fans directly, asking for their support. Since then, almost every episode begins with a message in which the creator, his coworkers, or other mysterious figures (who claim to be Joseph Fink) encourage listeners to support the project with donations, monthly declared donations, or shopping in the *Night Vale* online store. Another source of income became available when the podcast accumulated a significant fandom that was eager to participate in live events. Most of the tickets to the live shows are sold out several days after release, which hints at the popularity of the podcast. Thanks to the varied sources of income in the form of crowd funding, micropatronage, and merchandising, the show has creative space and independence. The authors guarantee and uphold the bimonthly release schedule, along with a high quality of writing and professional acting. It would not be possible without the financial support of the listeners and fans.

[5.2] Because fan donations are an important part of the podcast's financial system and are still a significant issue when it comes to *Night Vale*'s continued existence, our questionnaire had a few questions regarding the level of financial support among Polish fans. Out of 21 respondents, only two declared that they had donated money to the show by buying *Night Vale* merchandise. None of the other options, such as donating or signing up for regular monthly donations, was chosen. The majority—12 respondents—answered that they did not support the show yet, and the remaining seven declared that they simply did not donate and probably would not in the future. The 19 people who did not make any financial contribution to the show were also asked about their reasons, with the help of a multiple-choice question. Most of them (15 respondents) declared that they simply did not have money to donate. Additionally, four people admitted that they do not know how they can financially support the show. Another four declared that they did not have a PayPal account, which is necessary for to donate or to shop in the *Night Vale* store. One respondent chose the "they're not that good" answer. Within the "other reasons" category, one person responded with characteristic *Night Vale*-ish humor: "The Evil forbids me" (zuo mi nie pozwala). Two felt the need to explain the reasons: "It didn't strike me, I'm not that attached" and "I don't have money, but if my situation gets better, I will fix my mistake!" (Nie mam pieniędzy, ale jak tylko moja sytuacja się poprawi—naprawię ten błąd!).

[5.3] These results should be compared with the broader context of demographics of the group as well as crowd-funding and fan practices in general in Poland. The audience in the United States, which is predominantly the biggest target group, is also most accustomed to the idea of crowd funding and micropatronage (Economist 2010). The Polish audience is not that familiar with those concepts; they remain in the process of being introduced into people's awareness. Currently there are two Polish sites that try to repeat the success of Kickstarter. One is called [wspieramykulture.pl](http://www.wspieramykulture.pl/) (concerned about creating cultural projects; <http://www.wspieramykulture.pl/> [we support culture]) and the second polakpotrafi.pl (<http://polakpotrafi.pl/> [Pole can]), which supports basically any project. Their effectiveness is not as outstanding as their American counterpart. Also, they are not extensively known among

average Polish Internet users. What is more, our daily observations of Polish fans' activities suggest that they are more likely to support Kickstarter initiatives than domestic ones. Additionally, the level of cyberpiracy is considerably higher in Poland than in the United States or Western European countries; the law is less strict when it comes to personal use of such files, and common practice usually leads to this kind of behavior being ignored. Furthermore, Polish currency, the zloty, is worth three times less than the US dollar (US\$1 = 3.13 zloty, as of January 30, 2014); further, the minimum wage in Poland is estimated to be approximately €369 (\$US499.67) per month (http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Minimum_wage_statistics). In the United States, the minimum wage income a month is approximately \$US1,160. According to the study group's demographics, most are students or recent graduates, so we can assume that their income, if they have any, is considerably smaller than the minimum wage in Poland and is mostly spent on their daily needs. By the same token, online payment methods are also limited because the Polish banking system differs slightly from the American system. Although the fan funding culture is gradually developing in Poland, it is neither as habitual nor as organized as in the United States. Thus, crowdfunding is less popular in Poland than it is in the United States.

6. Polish fan character visualizations and translations

[6.1] Just like any other fans, Polish fans engage in active fan practices, which Zubernis and Larsen (2012) note requires producing some extra content in the context of admired text. Polish fans create fan fiction and fan art, and they cosplay. However, because the Polish fandom of *Night Vale* is still growing in numbers, as well as struggling with assuming its own fandom identity (not all fans consider themselves part of the fandom), the results of fan practices are not particularly visible in a global fandom context. Fan fiction is written in both Polish and English, but it does not cross the cultural and cultural-linguistic barriers as freely as fans would like. Most of the artworks made by Polish fans are presented on international Web sites and services such as deviantArt or Tumblr, which makes it difficult to recognize Polish fan art artists at first glance. The blog of multifandom artist and designer Maja Lulek (<http://majalulek.blogspot.com/>) is one important exception because she posts her works on a blog that also serves as an artistic portfolio. However, we observe that, paradoxically, Polish fan art tries to fit international fan standards but does not recognize some important issues concerning media representation.

[6.2] A podcast might be considered a hot medium (McLuhan 1965), as it is similar to radio: it engages both the attention and imagination of the listeners. Hot media do not dominate our perception because they do not guarantee all the information at once; individuals must reconstruct the missing data for themselves. Up until the live shows, what most of the *Night Vale* characters looked like, or who they actually were, was not addressed, leaving their representation to the imagination of the listeners. A popular way of depicting Cecil is shared by most of the fans. This shared image can be described as fanon—fan-based ideas so common and widespread among all the fans of particular fandom that that are widely considered canonical, even if they do not exist within the original text—although Polish fandom does not use this word. In this dominant fan image, the anchor is depicted to be a young white man with black-and-white hair, violet eyes, quirky tattoos, sharpened teeth, and occasionally an additional pair of octopus arms attached to his body. He is dressed in a semiformal, elegant manner in a white shirt, colorful vest, and either a necktie or a bowtie. Because he lives in *Night Vale*, he could also be nonhuman or not completely human. This image prevails in both fan art and cosplay. The second idea, less explored (and maybe less catchy) in fan's activities, is to use the original actor's look to inform the character (figure 9).

Carlos is often portrayed as a scruffy-haired Latino wearing glasses and a lab coat with checked shirt and jeans (figure 10).



Figure 9. Cecil Baldwin, the radio anchor of *Night Vale*. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/CecilEdwardBaldwin>. [View larger image.]



Figure 10. Carlos cosplay performed by AcidTygr. Source: <http://allalongtheradiotower.tumblr.com>. [View larger image.]

[6.3] Fans around the world are drawing their own unique, conceptualized versions of *Night Vale* characters. It can be argued that the artists made a conscious choice while conceptualizing both Cecil and Carlos. Most of those depictions present the standard, fanon interpretation that is recognizable among global fans of the show. Examples of Polish fan works can be seen in figures 11 to 14. However, most of the Polish fan art is posted on international platforms, such as deviantArt or Tumblr, which exist within global fandoms, and because of this, they can be interpreted within global contexts, such as popular or high culture representations of race and ethnicity.

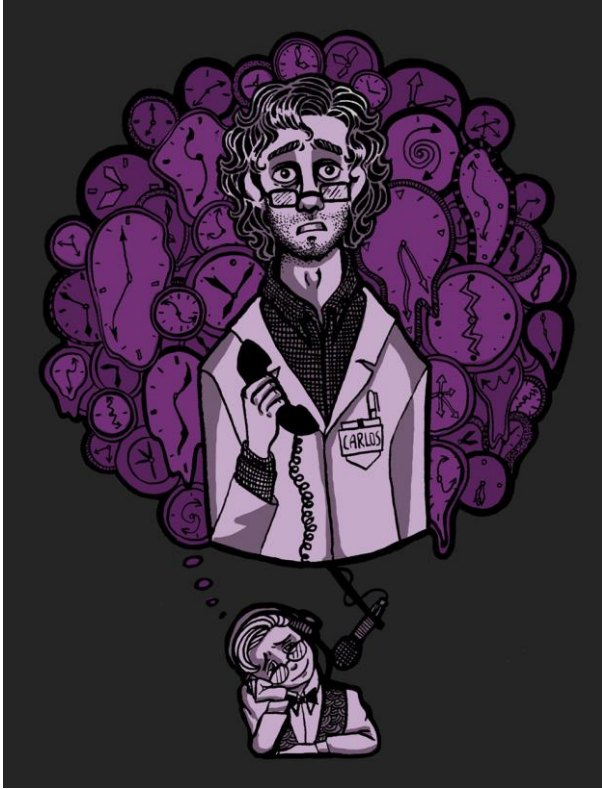


Figure 11. Fan art by Maja Lujek. Courtesy of Maja Lujek (<http://majalulek.blogspot.com/>). [View larger image.]

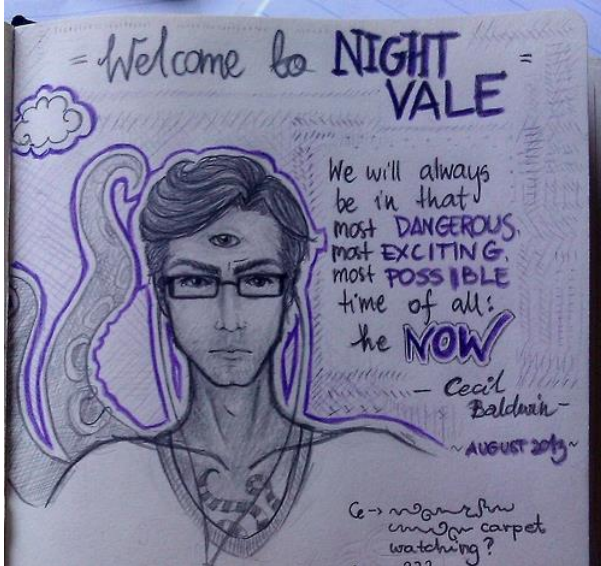


Figure 12. Sketch illustration showing Cecil with additional tentacles. Source: <http://destka-for-the-wicked.tumblr.com/>. [View larger image.]



Figure 13. Allantiee's take on Cecil in his workplace. Source: <http://allantiee.deviantart.com/>. [View larger image.]



Figure 14. Fan art by OlivCater. Carlos is here represented as a person of color, whereas Cecil is still white. Source: <http://olivcater.deviantart.com/>. [View larger image.]

[6.4] Most of the Polish-made fan art is quite similar to fans' ideas all over the world. Cecil's third eye, the tribal and cult tattoos on his arms, and Carlos's lab coat and messy hairstyle make them recognizable by other fans that are familiar with those ideas. Most fan art is concentrated on Cecil or Carlos; almost no other character appears in fan artwork. This is slightly different than the questionnaire analysis would suggest, as people declared their admiration for characters other than the main two.

[6.5] The Polish fandom of *Night Vale* engages in one other fan practice known widely in manga and anime fandoms: fan translations. One of the two main initiatives, Welcome to Night Vale Polska (<http://welcometonightvalepolish.wordpress.com>), was created by fans from the Facebook community, which has since been deleted for unknown reasons. The second project is a YouTube channel that provides the episodes with subtitles synchronized with the sounds of the show (<http://www.youtube.com/user/doubleohfangirl/>). However, only the first three episodes have been translated, and there is no information on plans to translate more. The small amount of available translated material can be attributed to two reasons. First, most of the fans have no problem listening to the podcast in English. Second, both the listeners and the translators have engaged in many heated discussions on how some aspects of the show should be translated, such as the exact translation of the term "Glow Cloud," as it was thought to be quite difficult to express all the glory and fright implied. Fan translators often elaborate on subjects that their intended readers may not be familiar with, such as cultural aspects or historical facts; in this particular fandom, such subjects include US history, Indian tribes, US customs, or US political structures in cities.

[6.6] The visual representation of characters seems to be shared by fans globally, so it would seem that such representation became independent of cultural influence. However, it would be interesting to see if the same visual representations are favored by fans living in non-majority-white countries. The creation of art requires a different set of skills than writing fan fiction or preparing translations for other fans. In both cases, an advanced knowledge of English is needed. The language barrier can be considered an obstacle for Polish fans wanting or trying to actively engage in the English-speaking fan culture in terms of fan fiction writing. It does not, however, imply that Polish-language fan fiction is not written at all. The *Welcome to Night Vale* Polish fandom has created its own Polish-speaking space that remains, in a way, separate from the global fandom. We are still researching the detached aspect of Polish fandom and are not ready to elaborate on this subject, beyond the fact that the quality of the texts seem to be on a level equal to other fan fiction. The second fan practice requiring fluent knowledge of English is the translations, although they also require a proficient knowledge of the native language as well as cross-cultural knowledge.

7. Race and ethnicity

[7.1] The issues of race and ethnicity are the second culture-related difference in analyzing *Welcome the Night Vale*. An obvious problem in worldwide media is providing misleading representations of people of color, as well as constant misrepresentation of gender and sexuality (Brooks and Hebert 2006). Fan initiatives have the power to make this kind of cultural shift toward media equality. This problem is vivid in the discussion among American fans, as seen in social and fan-related media such as Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, and LiveJournal. One prominent example is a Tumblr called Night Vale of Color (<http://nightvaleofcolor.tumblr.com/d>), which is dedicated to presenting nonwhite depictions of characters. In *Welcome to Night Vale*, thanks to its audio-only nature, much information, including what the characters look like and their ethnic background or cultural heritage, is

mostly unknown. There is one exception: the Apache Tracker, who is obviously of Slavic origin and pretending to be Apache, which Cecil considers to be highly insensitive and racist.

[7.2] *Night Vale* leaves much unsaid, including the characters' descriptions. Some fans claim that Cecil's looks should correspond to the actor who voices him, Cecil Baldwin. The voice-actor-to-character look analogy came up when the creators were discussing the live shows. Jeffrey Cranor played Carlos in episode 16 of the show. Nonetheless, he decided, along with Joseph Fink, that because his ethnicity and sexual identity do not match the previously provided description of the character, he should not be the one to voice Carlos. They decided to offer the role to Dylan Marron (figures 15 and 16). Cranor (2013) wrote,

[7.3]It sucks that there's a white straight male (me), playing a gay man of color (Carlos). Look, I know it's a voiceover, but it's not just that... What am I doing voicing this major character when there are so many talented, gay, Latino or Hispanic men who can/should be doing it? Why didn't I think of all of this before ep 16? I don't know.



Figure 15. Dylan Marron, the new voice of Carlos. Source: <http://nightvale.wikia.com/wiki/Carlos>. [View larger image.]



Figure 16. Official casting announcement from Dylan Marron's Web site. Source: <http://dylanmarron.tumblr.com/>. [View larger image.]

[7.4] However, in Poland, a country that is mostly ethnically and religiously homogenous, these issues are mocked or dismissed, even by fans claiming their open-mindedness for all the other minority matters in the show. One Welcome to Night Vale Polska group member started a survey on what Cecil was imagined to look like. Comments mocked the political correctness: "Quickly, somebody with headcanon black, to show we're not that bad!" One of the authors of this article reacted to those statements, politely saying that such comments could be considered racist. The discussion that developed was heated but also substantial. Most of the interlocutors expressed unawareness of issues related to race and ethnicity; they often conflated racism with rebelling against mainstream culture. Polish fans, used to participation in international fandoms, tend to perceive discussions on representation, race, and racism as unimportant fuss and feel attacked for being white. One of the discussion participants stated, "I don't think there is anything wrong with the fact that, as white people, we imagine Cecil as white. After all he [the white Cecil] is more familiar for us" (A.'T.'M. 'Moim zdaniem nie ma nic złego w tym, że jako białe osoby wyobrażamy sobie Cecila białego. W końcu do takiego jest nam najbliżej; <https://www.facebook.com/groups/134875500055093/>). Still, most of the discussants are disconnected from multicultural and diverse societies, and therefore the issues of diverse skin color are not a part of their everyday life. Thus, discussions such as this one are seen as hate-inducing Internet flame wars. Furthermore, when the term "white privilege" (McIntosh 1989) was introduced to the discussion (while analyzing why, in most *Night Vale* fan art, Cecil is depicted as white), it was first interpreted as racist and, after the term was explained, considered an exaggeration. Furthermore, most of discussion participants expressed curiosity and were interested in defining racism; they were also keen to discuss race representation in private messages.

[7.5] Because Poland is mostly inhabited by people of Slavic and Caucasian descent, the visibility of people of color is almost nonexistent, even in big cities. For Polish citizens, a model (statistical) person has white skin because this is the color they see exclusively on a daily basis. Fans' imaginations thus construct characters with white skin—not as a result of a description or preference, but as a result of the way the fans perceive the world. Problems of race and ethnicity are considered too distant from Polish reality; however, the level of racism and intolerance displayed in Polish mass media and the Polish Internet is considered high, according to the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance Report (2010). The question of media representation is thus mostly not an issue that Polish fans discuss; however the diversity of characters' identities is one of the factors that attracts Polish listeners.

[7.6] The existence and experience of this heated discussion made us realize that Polish fans differ significantly from US and UK fans because of their sociocultural background. The discussion of race does not immediately come up among Polish fans. It is, however, evoked by the cultural exchange on social media and fan platforms. Polish fans tend to notice and follow the general discussions on those topics and form their own opinion on the basis of what they read on the Internet, not everyday experience, which results, depending on the level of their involvement in these discussions, in mocking advocacy for racial representation. Intellectual acceptance may occur, but it takes more time and reading for behavioral changes to appear. Fans can therefore teach each other about problems they can never experience themselves. Moreover, they can learn from each other's experiences about diversity, race, and representation. By being involved in global fandom, they gain insight into matters and problems that they would otherwise not think about. By indirect experience, they gain awareness of these problems; should they later experience something similar, they may behave with more empathy.

[7.7] Fans, especially those active on Tumblr, tend to perceive themselves as the most tolerant and open-minded of people—equality in general, as well as LGBTQ rights, are well known and supported. In contrast, other equality-related issues such as race, representation, or ethnic minorities are still not globally discussed. Moreover, as a result of cultural differences, some fans are isolated from the day-to-day experiences of diversity because exposure to ethnic diversity is not equal among cultures. Academics must thus consider the cultural background of the fan group they are researching; otherwise, some statements the fans may use in their fan practices or discussions might seem intentionally racist or ignorant. Involvement in fandom can, to some extent, shape both thinking patterns and behaviors toward more significant open-mindedness. However, the experiences that are read about remain indirect in nature and have less impact than direct ones. The possible influence of the varied fan experiences may influence behaviors and attitudes—a subject that ought to be examined more deeply.

8. Conclusions

[8.1] *Welcome to Night Vale* has gathered an enormous international fandom during its short existence. The support of fans and their fascination with this improbable desert city have enabled the creators to hold live shows that could fund further episodes. The tale of weird Night Vale has spread across the world through social media, reaching geographically distant countries like Poland, where it has found its share of faithful followers. Results show that Polish fandom differs greatly in modes of reading and fan practices while sharing the same visual imagination as fans worldwide.

[8.2] Polish *Night Vale* fandom is objectively a small group of multilingual fans who enjoy the eerie and uncanny character of the podcast. From the demographic data gleaned from our survey, we infer that they are mostly students or young adults with high levels of education and creativity. Their way of reading the podcast demonstrates a culture bias; for example, they do not recognize the conspiracy theory tropes, which are highly relevant to those who live in the United States. The weird fiction aspect of the story is far more important than the government-related issues, to the extent that it justifies the conclusion that it is a different, culture-related way of reading. Because of Polish fans' ethnic homogeneity, the race and ethnicity of the characters are not discussed—there is nothing to discuss among those who primarily think of others as the same as them. Until confronted with other worldviews and depictions within the international fandom, the imaginary homogeneity of the citizens remains. Funding is another aspect that differentiates Polish fans from others. They tend not

to support the show financially, mostly as a result of economic and technological obstacles, as well as an underdeveloped crowd-funding culture. The fans we surveyed are highly creative, and the show-related artworks are at the same level as internationally produced fan art. The visual imagery of characters and their motives seem to be the most common aspect that Polish fans share with the global fandom.

[8.3] Polish fans of *Welcome to Night Vale* differ from the global and American fandoms of the show; however, further cross-cultural research must be performed. The work presented here has important implications for further studies on fandoms forming in noncore countries and the modes of these fans' engagement.

9. Acknowledgments

[9.1] We thank the members of the Welcome to Night Vale Polska group for their willingness to take part in the study and share their fan works with us. Thank-yous also go to others who engaged in the study and are not connected to the Facebook group. Also, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to Amy Lindsay, Piotr Jacobsson, and Tomasz Ziółkowski for their editorial help.

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