Secret Masters of Fandom. Conventions and the Rise of the Active Fan.

This week is Quakecon, one of the largest LAN party videogaming conventions, which has been running since 1996. Over 9000 people are expected to attend. Earlier this month, an estimated 130 000 fans attended Comicon in San Diego. For October 2015, David Langford's website Ansible lists twenty-two conventions around the world (not including commercial conventions or, as it transpires, one that the author is attending). Three of these take place in Southern Ireland alone.

The media often contexualise their reports about fan conventions by expressing surprise that people who have met online might want to congregate together and meet in person. In particular, gamers are often tarnished with this slur, under the age-old and entirely erroneous preconception that videogaming is an unsociable, solitary activity. This has been compounded by the activities of the online group, #gamergate, who have harassed and intimidated many prominent members of the gaming community in the last year (most notably, female developers, journalists and creatives). It is very easy to assume from this apparently toxic environment that gamers are quite happy to remain at home, hurling virtual faeces and inventive at each other. Fortunately, the reverse is true.

Socialisation between fans of geek culture has been a common occurrence for years – the first Worldcon was held in 1939. Charities exist for sending fans with limited means, or of under-represented groups to conventions around the world. There are even conventions for convention runners (but only if you are a Secret Master of Fandom)*. Below the surface of the gleeful press images of people dressed as cheerful looking anime characters and characters from your favourite TV series or film is an established community of convention ('con') goers, organisers, and attendees.

There are two broad types of fan convention. The commercially run enterprise is run with an overall profit in mind. These events tend to be large scale and well publicised, including events such as San Diego Comicon (SDCC), Gamescom, GenCon and PAX. Subsidiary events surrounding these events often attract industry professionals and creatives, and large conventions are often used as a springboard to release new work or products. SDCC is now seen as a place where companies like LucasArts showcase forthcoming work – who this year treated 6000 fans to a free outdoor concert, new information about the next Star Wars movie, and guest star appearances from the cast, old and new. Similarly, E3, GDC and Gamescom are launch platforms for new games, as well as blending industry professionals, journalists and fans together for 3-4 days of noise and promotional material. These events are cheerful and noisy, known for their huge queues, freebies and panels featuring guest speakers and celebrities. The gender split between male / female attendees at Comicon was equal this year at 49% each, with the remaining 2% made up of non-binary attendees.

Fan run conventions such as Worldcon, which hosts the science fiction Oscars each year in the form of the Hugo Awards, are no less riotous, but on a rather different scale. Worldcon is typical of these conventions in that it is entirely run

by volunteers. Unlike many other fan run events, the location of Worldcon changes each year, and is voted for by attendees, so teams bid up in advance to host subsequent events and run lengthy election campaigns as a result. Fan run conventions focus more on showcasing a mixture of authors, creative experts and fans within their given field, often running extensive programmes where attendees can see everything from authors playing and recommending their favourite boardgames in front of an audience, to discussions on diversity and representation in fanfiction, to readings and signings by people at the top of their field. The attendance is usually lower, but this allows for a more initimate setting where guests, speakers and fans mingle together.

Conventions of all shapes and forms are an increasingly popular element of fandom; after all, getting together with several thousand people who are all interested in the same things as yourself, with the added incentive of parties, meet-ups, talks and discussions by people at the top of each area seems like a recipe for enjoyment. For gaming events like Quakecon, it is also the opportunity to experience play against people who attendees may have known for years, but never met in person, and to watch people at the very top of their game play competitively; something with more mainstream sports fans might recognise as a regular part of their leisure activities already.

The amount of attendees for conventions continues to grow, as fans from around the world reach out to each other. One reason for the huge growth in convention organisation and attendance also seems to be a feeling of deep reciprocity amongst fan themselves; that of 'giving back' to the community. It is this reason that also makes ructions in this apparently esoteric community so alarming. Most recently, the Hugos have been [subjected to huge controversy](#) after two groups of right-wing authors managed to influence the nominations by releasing a 'slate' of recommended reading, and getting their supporters to block vote these people in. Destablising such exoteric groups is often an alarming experience, as fans realise that despite their shared experiences of consumption, their cultural values and preconceptions may be wildly different. Whilst it is comforting to regard fandom as one large, happily geeky family, the growing care and attention given by conference runners to their Codes of Conduct also speaks of a group very much aware of the need to not make assumptions about others, and to provide clear guidelines for behaviour whilst in the convention space. Overall, whilst conventions continue to grow and to provide an exciting place for fans to meet and share experiences, it is also unwise to regard these are purely utopian spaces.

*http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=SMOF

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