

# Fandom in Science Fiction

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## 1. Introduction

Before starting with the article proper, I would like to shortly introduce myself, as my personal investment in fandom is an important part of the research that informs this paper.<sup>1</sup> I am a Professor of Literature and Languages; my teaching and scholarly areas include creative writing, critical theory, new media and fan studies, and digital humanities. I've been a fan of science fiction (in the broadest sense of the word) since I was five; my father, a geologist, left his *Analog*s and *Amazing Stories* sitting around, and I was reading them alongside L. Frank Baum's Oz series, and, later, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. I sometimes tell people I got a Ph.D. in English so I could teach science fiction and fantasy. I was active in Star Trek fandom during the late 1970s; then I became a member of APA-5<sup>2</sup> in the early 1980s. I had to withdraw from fandom when I began writing my dissertation, but in 2003, because of Peter Jackson's live-action films, I found myself back (this time in online media fandom), and, within a few years, found myself doing scholarship on fandom. My academic [Dreamwidth Journal](#) is where I blog about some of my fan scholarship. My experience and research is primarily with English speaking fandom(s) in the United States, although I know that active fandoms exist in Australia and the United Kingdom, and that there are active fandoms in other languages that have simply not been the focus of as much scholarly interest. I have published on fan fiction, but my current work involves sociolinguistic and applied linguistics work on debates about racism in fandom.

When I was asked to pick a representative text or two to accompany this lecture and to recommend on the website, I found myself more than stymied because fan produced texts are widely varied and can include all of the following:

- Millions of fan fictions published on the internet as this [Google Search](#) for the term 'fan fiction' illustrates;

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1 I would like to thank Lars Schmeink for giving me this opportunity to participate in such an innovative program, and Mike Smith and Jeremy Gamez at A&M-Commerce's Faculty Center for Teaching with Technology for helping me with the technology on this end of the lecture. Also, throughout this article links are provided for further study.

2 APA stands for Amateur Press Association; APAs (which still exist) are sort of a cross between a fanzine and a pen-pal club: they are a group fanzine.

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- Millions of fan videos (vids), which are published on the internet as shown [here](#);
- Millions of filk songs<sup>3</sup> (fan created music consisting of parodies and original content) published on the internet, both in audio and video formats, as well as postings of lyrics as shown [here](#);
- There is also [cosplay](#) (costume play), which consists of fans creating and/or wearing costumes to represent characters from their favorite fandoms
- Multiple types of gaming, including [online gaming](#); [console gaming](#) as well as [Live Action Roleplaying](#), or LARPs;
- [Fan art](#) has existed for decades; and, despite the association of fandom with the newest of technologies, there is a growing interest in [fan crafting](#), which is distinct from cosplay and which involves a multitude of crafting activities such as knitting, sewing, baking, etc. stuff based on fandom sources;
- Another more material based fanac (or fan activity) is [Science fiction model building](#).

This list is certainly not comprehensive since the creativity and productivity of fans seems to approach infinity. Nor are all these activities separate: fans write fan fiction for games; videos are made of LARPs; communities of fans come together to discuss crafts, and fans move between online and offline fan groups and activities. Fans can be active in more than one fandom, and in more than one mode of creative production or commentary.

In the face of this nearly infinite amount of fan production, how could a single text from any of the areas of fan production be considered representative? After much discussion with friends online (I am active in online media fandom, primarily in *The Lord of the Rings* fandom), I decided that the best single text representing my focus on fan activities in the context of science fiction would probably be the film, [Galaxy Quest](#) (US 1999, Dir. Dean Parisot). This film nicely connects to a number of activities relating to fandom: it is an homage, or parody, of *Star Trek: The Original Series* (US 1966-69; Creat. Gene Roddenberry; considered to be one of the first, if not the first) of the major media fandoms; it emphasizes fandom as a group of people coming together in shared love; it shows negative aspects of the impact on actors whose fame in the original show makes getting other roles difficult, and it also comments, I think lovingly but critically on the limited nature of roles for women. The moment in the film that turned me from an appreciative viewer into a fan, and which captures the essence of my understanding of 'fandom' was the Captain telling a

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3 The term 'filk' is believed to have started with a typo for 'folk' music in an early sf con's program. As fans tend to do, the new coinage was seized upon to be an example of the special jargon of fandom or [fanspeak](#), glossaries of which also exist all over the internet.

fan that "[It's all real!](#)" This moment is based on a fan group (who happen to be aliens) so loving and believing in the reality of the show that they made it their own: they built everything in it, and made it real. Rather than any specific body of texts, this article focuses on the concept of fandom(s) as activities and the groups performing these activities. Those groups may be formed entirely offline, or entirely online, or interact in both spaces.

## 2. Terminologies and Communities

Given the time limits of an article such as this, in the next part I'm going to provide a quick overview of important elements of fandom, including a short history of fandom in the United States.<sup>4</sup> I will also be discussing some of the major changes in fandom in the later part of the 20th century and the first part of the 21st including the internet which has not only resulted in an explosion in the size and types of fandoms, it has also provided fans an opportunity to document their own productions and histories. SF fans were amongst the earliest adopters of the new technologies as [Henry Jenkins](#) argues in his book *Convergence Culture*, and fans have been using the internet to create fandom communities and clubs, document fandom histories, archive fandom productions, and study and discuss the texts that are at the heart of their fandoms since the 1980s!

### 2.1 Terminologies (English):

The word "fandom" has been used for well over a century, as shown by the entries and quotations in the Oxford English Dictionary.<sup>5</sup> The term "fan" comes from

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4 I include links for material on fandom in other countries on [Virtual-SF.com](#).

5 **FANDOM**; Etymology: < fan n.2 + -dom suffix.>; orig. U.S. The world of enthusiasts for some amusement or for some artist; also in extended use; 1903 *Cincinnati Enquirer* 2 Jan. 3/1 (heading): "Fandom puzzled over Johnsonian statements"; 1928 *Publishers' Weekly* 30 June: "Ty Cobb, the idol of baseball fandom."

**FAN, noun 2**; Etymology: Abbrev. of fanatic adj. and n. Re-formed in 19th cent.; A fanatic; in modern English (orig. U.S.): a keen and regular spectator of a (professional) sport, orig. of baseball; a regular supporter of a (professional) sports team; hence, a keen follower of a specified hobby or amusement, and gen. an enthusiast for a particular person or thing. [...]

**-DOM, suffix**; Etymology: Old English -dóm = Old Saxon -dóm, Middle Dutch -doem, Dutch -dom; The number of these derivatives has increased in later times, and -dom is now a living suffix, freely employed to form nonce-derivatives, not only with the sense of 'condition, state, dignity', but also with that of 'domain, realm' (fig.) [...].

"fanatic," and while a great deal of attention has been paid to science fiction fandoms, the earliest print sources using the term are referring to sports fans. The terminology was needed to reflect the mass audiences that began to follow the growing cultural and commercial activities (pulp publishing, films, television, sports, etc.). The coinage of "fandom" uses the fairly contemporary noun, "fan", with an Old English suffix ("-dom") that carries the sense of a stage of being and a "domain, realm," so the term most often refers to groups who come together around a shared interest in some cultural production.

Even though this article is on science fiction fandom, I'm using sf as a broad umbrella term rather than a narrow one, showing the scope of how fandoms dedicated to what has been called speculative fiction or fantastic literatures appearing in multiple types of media (anime, comic books, fiction, film, gaming graphic novels, television) have grown over the past century and more.

## *2.2 United States Fandom(s)*

Science fiction fandom in the United States began in the early part of the 20th century. The first fans were readers of the science fiction, fantasy, and horror stories published in [pulp magazines](#) (magazines produced on cheap wood pulp paper). When [Hugo Gernsback](#), an inventor and an immigrant, started popular magazines devoted to an amazing new genre of literature that he called "scientifiction," (195) he encouraged readers to send letters about the stories and essays in, and then he published them in "Letter Columns." The printed letters included mailing addresses, and fans began to communicate with each other. As Helen Merrick, an Australian sf scholar argues, SF fans created "[virtual communities](#)" well before the world wide web or internet began. Fans not only corresponded, but if they were living in the same city, they got together and created fan clubs. They published their own magazines (fan magazines, or fanzines, usually abbreviated as zines), and organized conventions (cons) for fans and creators to come together to talk about science fiction and the universe.

For decades, [sf conventions](#) and [fanzines](#) were some of the most important ways in which fandom, the community of fans, defined itself. Originally, sf cons were run by fans, for fans, and some still are; however, during the last part of the 20th century, for-profit corporations began running large multi-media cons that can and do draw in thousands of fans. For example, [Comic Con](#) is a four-day event drawing over 100,000 attendees.

The changes in cons reflect some of the changes in sf fandoms: the earliest cons focused primarily on fiction published in the pulp magazines and cheap paperbacks, with some focus on films. But the explosion of media materials in all genres has been matched with a growing number of cons that focus on anime/

manga, comics books, and gaming, or all of the above; many cons feature an art room, gaming rooms, television and film rooms, cosplay contests, gaming, and other fan activities. Some cons focus on a specific genre or franchise (horror, Harry Potter); others feature programming about sf and related genres in books and media.

Other changes in sf fandom are related to changing demographics, especially the inclusion and participation of a growing number of women and increasing ethnic and sexual diversity. The image of 'the sf fan' as a young, white, adolescent male is no longer accurate. The popularity of *Star Trek* is often pointed to as one of the reasons for a growing number of women fans in US fandoms, with women fans being the subject of Camille Bacon-Smith's 1992 book, [Enterprising Women](#). However, women were active in fandom long before *Star Trek* as later publications by [Justine Larbalestier](#) and [Helen Merrick](#) show. Women were in science fiction fandom from the earliest pulp periods despite an ongoing process of and marginalization.

In the context of the other social changes of the latter half of the 20th century (feminism, civil rights movements, and gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender rights movement), the demographics of fandom have changed, facilitated by the internet which provides venues for fans to participate in fandom that go beyond the sf con culture. The last two decades have seen a huge growth in fandoms, and the interactions between different types of fandom, and fans all over the world. During the 1980s, newsgroups such as [Usenet](#) served as online fandom spaces and can [still be accessed](#). Then, in the 1990s came [Mailing lists](#) or discussions, often associated with a website such as [The Fantasy and Science fiction website](#).

The newsgroups and mailing lists were online, but tended to mimic in some ways traditional spaces for fandom; sf clubs and cons were fairly centralized, often in urban areas. That centralization began to fragment with the movements of fandoms into social networking spaces, first with the creation of [LiveJournal](#) in 1999. As with Usenet, fans were early adopters of LiveJournal (although the site did not solely consist of sf fans). Since LJ's code was open source, a number of clones and later, a fork (revising the code) were created. The growing number of social networking sites, the phenomenon referred to by some as [Web 2.0](#), meant science fiction fandom became accessible for many fans who were not able for a number of reasons to participate in local clubs or cons in cities, resulting in more a diverse demographic. More open participation in fandom by a greater variety of fans also means more visibility and attention paid by mainstream media.

### 3. Diversity and Fandom

#### 3.1 Feminism

The primary (and probably only) feminist science fiction convention is [WisCon](#) which has been held every year since 1977 in Madison, Wisconsin. The first con was a small one started by a group of students at the University of Wisconsin; it is currently a four-day event hosted by a committee of 100 plus people that has become world-known as the place where the feminist sf community gathers. WisCon is also the primary location for the [Tiptree Award](#), the only SF award that recognizes the exploration and expansion of gender roles in science fiction and fantasy. The Tiptree Award is named after [James Tiptree, Jr.](#), which is the pseudonym used by Alice Bradley Sheldon to publish her award winning science fiction.

#### 3.2 GLBT

The [Gaylactic Network](#) originated in Boston, in 1986 and has since grown into a national organization with clubs in a number of areas. Fans have argued that more gender and sexual diversity should be part of science fiction media, without much success. A years-long campaign to get a gay character in *Star Trek* has met without much success (rumors exist that the next J. J. Abrahams *Star Trek* film will have a gay character). Finally, some fans gave up and began creating their own gay *Star Trek*: [The Hidden Frontier](#). Fans who are frustrated with elements of their source text commonly 'rewrite' parts of it (shown in many, but not all, fan fictions and fan videos), transforming the source text in the process.

#### 3.3 Race Debates

In 1998, [Samuel R. Delany](#) published an article titled "[Racism and Science Fiction](#)" in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*; the article was later reprinted in Sheree R. Thomas' anthology, *Dark Matter* (2000). The article inspired the formation of the [Carl Brandon Society](#) at the 1999 WisCon. The Society's mission is "to increase racial and ethnic diversity in the production of and audience for speculative fiction," and their vision is "a world in which speculative fiction, about complex and diverse cultures from writers of all backgrounds, is used to understand the present and model possible futures; and where people of color are full citizens in the community of imagination and progress" ("About").

In 2009, a wide-ranging discussion about race and racism in the sf publishing and fan communities took place online. Called [Racefail 09](#), this discussion was not the first time online attention was paid to racism (there had



been a number of debates in 2007 and 2008 in specific fandoms), but the months-long discussion that came to be known as "Racefail" differed from previous ones in several ways: the debates crossed fandoms, not being limited to specific ones (such as *Harry Potter* or *Stargate*); the sustained nature of the ongoing postings; and, finally, the participation a number of professional writers and editors as well as fans.

In 2009, [Racebending.com](http://Racebending.com) formed to protest the casting for characters in M. Night Shyamalan's adaptation of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (US 2010). The original text, a children's animated series, aired on Nickelodeon from 2005-2008 (Creat. Michael D. DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko) and was celebrated for its differences from the majority of white and European media: the show incorporated religious, historical, cultural, and material elements from the cultures of China and India. When the casting call issued in 2008 called for "Caucasian or any other ethnicities," (cf. Hoffman, n.pag.) parts of fandom began to protest the potential whitewashing (casting white actors to play characters of color). Cultural blunders made in later casting calls (asking Korean applicants to wear kimonos) occurred, and later calls showed that the only roles for Asian actors would be those of minor and supporting characters. Finally, in a world that had no settings in Europe or Africa, African American actors were cast with the final effect being darker-skinned actors playing villains while world-saving heroes were white. The film was released in 2010, and the concerns raised by Racebending.com and [Aang Ain't White](http://AangAin'tWhite.com) were expressed in a number of the national media articles and [reviews](#).

In the years since its founding, Racebending.com has grown to include supporters in more than [fifty countries](#), and has organized direct protests as well as meeting with studios, speaking out at community and university organizations, and presenting at [conferences](#), both academic and fan oriented. Their mission statement is:

Racebending.com is an international grassroots organization of media consumers who support entertainment equality. We advocate for underrepresented groups in entertainment media. Since our formation in 2009, we have been dedicated to furthering equal opportunities in Hollywood and beyond. ("About us")

As Henry Jenkins notes in the final two chapters of *Convergence Culture*, the internet allows the opportunity for participatory democracy: the fact that social justice work relating to gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity has been done and is being done in sf fandom, in a very real way, affecting both online and offline cultures, is an example of just how real fandom can be.

## 4. Conclusion

I have only been able to give quick overviews of some of the important elements of science fiction fandom, but there are many resources, in print and online, that can be used if you are interested in studying more about fandom.

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