Chapter 14
When Science Fiction Meets Reality:
The History, Fandoms, and Logistics of Atlanta’s Dragon Con™

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ABSTRACT
Eighty years after the first science fiction convention, geek culture has gone mainstream and facilitated exponential growth in the fandom convention industry. With fandom conventions facing increasing competition and changing demographics, standing out in the crowded convention space is essential. Dragon Con founded in 1987 created the idea of the multi-genre convention that has something for everyone. Since its inception, Dragon Con has changed to fit fans’ evolving tastes and formed strategic relationships with key partners. With growth comes issues related to registration, wait lines, harassment and security which need to be addressed while trying to take into account the younger and more diverse fandoms.

INTRODUCTION
What does it mean to be a fan? The word is derived from ‘fanatic’ a term used to describe someone who is “extremely enthusiastic about and devoted to some interest or activity.” (Merriam-Webster, 2019) Fans exist for a diverse collection of people, things and organizations and often times their obsession can seem irrational or irrelevant to those that do not share the same zealotry. Fans rally around sports teams, musicians, movies, television shows, authors, and comic books to name a few. Kristin Michael (2014) in the forward to Fan CULTure: Essays on Participatory Fandom in the 21st Century described why she is a fan, “The reasons we become fans are varied and personal: being a fan allows us to express ourselves, it helps us connect to like-minded people, and it allows us to escape into a world devoid of the pressures of life, even if only for 30 minutes at a time. But more than anything, being a fan means being in love” (p. 6). The ideas of finding personal expression and connecting with others with the same interest are

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keys to what brings fans together to form fandoms. The Oxford dictionary defines a collection or community of fans as a fandom or subculture. Recently, the fandom of *Game of Thrones* waited impatiently for the final season to be broadcast on HBO. They tweeted and snapped their impatience, posted memes about waiting, and binged watched the entire series. Fans discussed online in chat groups and on social media about who would live, who would die, and who would sit on the throne.

Stephen J. Sansweet (2014) suggests that “Fandom today is all about popular culture, mass media, and the ability to instantly connect with like-minded others — something that couldn’t have been imagined when science-fiction and comic book fans first started small get-togethers in the 1930s” (p. 1) In today’s world of instant communication and the ability to easily and inexpensively talk to someone on the other side of the globe, it is hard to imagine a world when the easiest and cheapest way to communicate was through traditional mail. That was the world fandom communities existed in when conventions were first born.

**The Birth of the Fandom Convention**

Fandoms are built around community, but in order for communities to exist people must be able to communicate with each other. Jonathan Strickland of the television series *How Stuff Works* said in the documentary *Four Days at Dragon Con*:

*One of the downsides of being a really hardcore fan of any sort of genre show or book series or movie series, whatever, is that often you don’t have a lot of people around you who share the same sort of passion and excitement that you have. In sports, it’s geographically based, regionally based so there is a good chance they’re people around you who have the same sort of interest. With things like science fiction and fantasy, it doesn’t obey the laws of geography. So, if you want to get together with your friends and chat about this show you really like you have to find that group first. The convention is pretty much the ultimate example of that* (Walsh, 2011).

In the late 1930s in both Northeast America and London, groups of science fiction fans were planning gatherings to meet and discuss their fandoms. Philcon (Philadelphia Science Fiction Society) claims to have the “first and longest-running conference on science fiction, fantasy, and horror” having hosted its first gathering in 1936 when science fiction fans from New York drove to Philadelphia to meet up with another group. A group of 20 British fans met in London the next year at what is described as the first planned gathering. By 1939, the first World Science Fiction Convention (now named Worldcon) was held in America with approximately 200 attendees. WorldCon is now truly a world event with sites selected through a bidding process. In 2018 the 76th WorldCon was in San Jose, CA and attendance was 4,804.

By the 1950s, science fiction writers like Isaac Asimov were elevating science fiction from its pulp begins to literary works. It was also the 1950s that saw the release of such movies as *The War of the Worlds*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Forbidden Planet* and television shows like *The Twilight Zone*, *Science Fiction Theater* and *Flash Gordon*. By the end of the 1960s, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and *Star Trek* were boldly going where no one had gone before delivering outer space to the small screen. *Star Trek* also spawned fan clubs including the STAR TREK Interstellar which upon membership you received in the mail a letter penned by Gene Roddenberry the creator of the series. It said, “We value you, not only as a fan but as an active participant and contributor to our programs...We also may all be actively involved later this year in “Twisting the Peacock’s Tail’” (Fanlore, 2019). Roddenberry was
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