

Culture Convergence or Divergence? Spontaneous Art-making and Participatory Expression in the Private and Collective Lives of Youth.

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Introduction

With the advent of the Internet, distinctions have become blurred between those who create and those who consume art and culture. Adoring audiences—or *fans*—of certain popular commodities have come to be seen as central to the development of contemporary culture (Fiske, 1989). Insofar as fans imitate, manipulate, or improvise imagic or narrative commodities of popular culture, they have come to be understood as culture creators (Jenkins, 1992). Internet also has changed the boundaries of cultural interactions. Individuals, who live in diverse, isolated, or far-flung regions of the world, may join online *fandom*ⁱ communities to engage in discourse or interact with others, and create artistic products based on their common interests. In the process, they may share more than their interests in a commercially produced artifact. Interpretations of the fan phenomenon are negotiated and mediated through the diverse cultural and aesthetic ideals of many fan members; the end result is a kind of cultural convergence. Art educators who advocate originality and creativity as an ideal, or who aim to inspire youth to think critically and divergently, might view the prospect of convergent culture with alarm. Yet, if local and/or global cultural environments are being significantly determined, modified, and/or created by ordinary people—including adolescents and young adults who are fans of visual and narrative popular culture—then art teachers, who bear the mantle of teaching visual culture to youth, should be concerned about what, why, how, and to what ends young people are creatively engaging with popular culture.

As an art educator, the possibility that students who were fans of a phenomenon of popular culture might be influencing culture intrigued me and inspired my inquiries into fan-based art expressions of adolescents and young adults. I wondered what cultural ideologies these youth might be creating and projecting out of the inspirational stuff of popular culture, and I was curious regarding how the activities of culture creative might influence or be influenced by art education. In this paper, I will describe findings from inquiries about how youth became interested in two expressive activities related to popular culture, how they learned to create these art forms, and what they perceived the purpose and function of fan-based art making to be in their lives. I will conclude with an interpretation of the findings and implications for art education.

Exploring Fanart and Cosplay

I began my explorations of expressive fan activities by focusing on the appropriation of characters and storylines of popular narratives (i. e. novels, comics, graphic stories, films and television stories), in two forms of youths' spontaneous art making—*fanart*, or art that is based directly or indirectly on characters or settings from specific pop-culture phenomena (figure 1), and *cosplay*, or costume making, dressing, and posing as characters derived from pop-culture phenomena (figure 2). I began a four-year studyⁱⁱ of the fanart-making and costume play of hundreds of youth and adults who engaged in these activities as a feature of fandom participation. To collect data, I perused websites of fanartists and cosplayers, read their blogs, and exchanged online communications with dozens of youth who were identified via their contributions to web-based fanart galleries and cosplay sites, such as Cosplay.comⁱⁱⁱ, deviantArt.com^{iv}, Elfwood^v, Leakey Cauldron^{vi}, and Fan Art Central^{vii}. Fan-based activities and expressions were observed and photographed, and young fanartists and cosplayers were engaged in conversations at public events such as film openings, book release parties, and conventions. I studied thousands of fanart images and cosplay photographs, which were posted by fans on their websites or were displayed

at fan conventions. Data from these sources were analyzed using content analysis procedures described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Some findings of these investigations have been discussed and interpreted in several published papers (Chen, Lee, Manifold, & Wang, 2006; Manifold 2004, 2005).



Figure 1. *Lost in a River of Sadness*, Fanart by “~timmy-gost”. timmy-gost.deviantart.com/



Figure 2. Cosplay performance at AnimeExpo 2005. Photo by Marjorie Cohee Manifold

Recent investigations of fanart and cosplay have centered on direct, first hand accounts of what these activities and expressions mean to the fanartists and cosplayers who engage in and create them. From contacts made with fans that display their art or cosplay photographs online, over 300 fanartists and cosplayers were invited to respond to a questionnaire. The persons contacted were fans of various literary popular culture phenomena, such as animé/manga, science fiction and fantasy stories, films, and television shows. Over 100 youth responded to my email requests by answering the questions put to them. All but four of the respondents were between the ages of 14 and 24 and 86% were female. The sampling included individuals from seventeen countries, including the USA, Canada, the United Kingdom, Finland, France, Belgium, Italy, Mexico, the Philippines, Portugal, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Indonesia, Spain, Taiwan, Japan, and China. Although socio-economic information was not directly sought, the respondents’ access to the Internet and ability to respond in properly written English suggested that these young people probably were well educated and of the middle class.

The questions, which encouraged open-ended responses, asked the participants to comment on the role of fanart making in their lives, and included the following^{viii}:

1. When and how did you first get interested in fandom communities and/or creating fanart (or cosplay) and with whom do you share your interests?
2. Could you describe how you learned the techniques of this art form?
3. Of what importance is fanart or cosplay to your life?
4. What professional hopes or expectations do you have for the future in terms of your artistic activity?

When and How Did You First Become Interested in Creating this Type of Art?

About one third of the study subjects remembered having been interested in drawing favorite characters of popular culture from early childhood. These interests in the narratives of pop culture were intimately associated with play among same-age peers, although group rather than individual interests seemed to direct the play. In other words, if several members of the

group wanted to improvise a scene from Spiderman, all those in the group, regardless of their interest in Spiderman, would enter into the play.

Entrance into fandom communities typically began (69%) when the respondents were between the ages of 12-14, although a significant number of respondents (nearly 25%) became fans as older adolescents or adults. The participatory engagements of adolescents and young adults were distinguished from the fan interests of young children by the older youths' intense drives to engage with the textual, graphic, and media conveyed literatures of popular culture even when there were no others in the real social group with whom they could share their interests. If a fan could find no peers in the local social community who shared his or her interest, the fan turned to the Internet as a means of interacting with other like-minded fans.

Why Do You Think this Form of Art Interested You?

It was the story or, more specifically, the unique characters and character interactions of the popular narrative that attracted adoring attention from fans. Respondents of the questionnaire reported that they were drawn to complex stories peopled by characters with intricate psychologies in complicated relationships. It became the fanartist's or cosplayer's task to depict not only the story action, but also describe those emotions within each character that motivated that character to act or react in one way or another. Every respondent of the study identified character personality as both the most difficult to convey and the most important imagic effect to master. As one explained, "Personality shapes . . . how [the characters] relate with one another and how they react to their world."

Erikson (1993), a developmental psychologist, and Bettelheim (1976), who explored the role of fairy tales in the psychology of youth, are two among many theorists who believed that adolescents' interests in how fictional characters within a story thought or interacted reflected the youths own quests to develop a sense of self. Four respondents (all of whom were young adults) indicated awareness that their interests in specific popular culture narratives or characters were tied to quests for sense of self. These four described their earlier fanart or cosplay activities as presenting ways of dealing with emotional or situational problems *during adolescence*. They claimed to have lost interest in drawing or cosplaying characters as direct surrogates of self once they had passed through adolescence

Nearly 80% of respondents indicated that fanart and cosplay interests helped them understand other people^x. Creating fanart became a way of figuring out "how the world works" – not by reading the original author's interpretation of these interactions—but by personally manipulating character interactions and understanding or "seeing" how these relationships might be. In this way fanartists and cosplayers began to decode some of the mysteries of human experience.

The respondents also were enthusiastic about meeting fans from other parts of the world. They enjoyed the social connections, and seeing their favorite characters and stories depicted in the diverse aesthetic styles of fans from different parts of the world. Fans did not always agree about how a character should be represented or what an action of the story meant, nevertheless they negotiated fandom-specific symbolic visual languages and agreed upon certain archetypal forms and compositional conventions that conveyed the fundamental essence of the narrative (Manifold, 2005). The schema and symbolic motifs used in the visual telling of popular culture narratives, therefore, were *culturally specific* to the fandom group or subgroup^x that created and appreciated them. Fans, as representatives of a particular fandom culture, prided themselves on their abilities to recognize visual-cues and decode layers and sub-texts of symbolic meaning hidden within the visual representations of their favorite stories. In this sense, these fans of popular culture could be understood as superimposing an alternate net-like aesthetic across geo-cultural boundaries.

Within the parameters of the fandom-specific aesthetic, the goal of individual fanartists and cosplayers was to develop a unique style of representation, which would set that individual

apart from other fanartists and cosplayers within the fandom. In order to accomplish this, they sometimes drew from the traditions of their local cultures, or appropriated aspects of style from past traditions of art. In this way the artworks of the more accomplished fanartists and cosplayers diverged from the source models, although they respected those formal conventions of schema and symbolic representation set by the fandom.

Describe How You Learned the Techniques of this Art Form?

More than one third of the study respondents volunteered that their fanart or costume making skills were “self-taught,” because their art learning and making skills had been developed through self-motivated interests and practices. Fanartists applied strategies such as intently studying and relentlessly copying models created by the original, commercial authors and artists of the source materials. In the privately situated environment of the fandom community, they asked advice of more skilled fanartists and submitted their work for critique by other fans and fanartists. Information exchanged through these constructive critiques was mentioned as the most valued aid to learning by 80% of the respondents.

Cosplayers reported turning to relatives (i. e. mothers, grandmothers, aunts) and other women in the community for instruction in sewing and dressmaking techniques. They appropriated materials from thrift shops, craft stores, and online sites that might be altered or constructed into costumes. In chat rooms, they shared information regarding how props might be made. Almost every cosplayer appreciated tutorial or instructional materials that explained or demonstrated how to make some aspect of a costume; however, nearly one fourth of the fanartists criticized the use of tutorials or printed guides because they perceived these as dictating specific processes that could be detrimental to the fanartist’s discovering a personal style or way of working.

The pervasive belief among art teachers, that fanart is slavishly copied imagery, made acquisition of art knowledge through formal instruction problematic. Over 35%^{xi} of the fanartist respondents indicated, although useful techniques, such as perspective, foreshortening, or shading, these knowledge skills were learning in formal art classes, this knowledge was acquired *in spite of* the prejudices of their instructors. Youth who were discouraged from sharing their fanart work with their high school classmates were denied an opportunity to seek and receive constructive critiques of this work. In a few cases (10%), fanartists described the reactions of art teachers to their interests as being so adverse as to discourage the student from taking *any* art courses in either high school or college^{xii}.

Several fanartists (about 18%) expressed a belief that art teachers misunderstood fanart works as being juvenile, immature, or naïve art forms. A few fanartists (12%) acknowledged that their art teachers understandably were concerned that fanart constituted plagiarism of copyrighted intellectual property. Other, respondents attributed art teachers’ disdain for fanart to their lack of appreciation or understanding of the instructional benefits of copying from original models as source materials. Two respondents commented on the “hypocrisy” of art teachers asking students to “copy *styles* rather than *compositions*.” According to these respondents, art teachers convey a double standard and put emphasis on an inappropriate aspect of art learning when they ask students to, for example, “paint a composition of the student’s choice in the style of Cubism, Impressionism, or Post Impressionism,” while prohibiting the student from rendering a compositional arrangement of a great artist in the student’s personal style. Helénè, a fanartist from France, describes the benefits of the latter approach.

I made a Harry Potter themed version of Picasso’s Bullfight; *The Death of the Torero*^{xiii}, which became the death of the wizard Sirius Black^{xiv}. It made me look very closely at the painting. [I learned a lot] about Picasso and about composing a painting.

The fanartist respondents of this study overwhelmingly agreed that copying serves the need of the beginning fanartists to learn important drawing skills and might assist technically

skilled fanartists' desires to develop personal styles that would set them apart from the original artists and other fanartists who create images based on the same sources^{xv}. In this sense, a similarity can be drawn to folk artists who, for example, create quilts or construct violins. The quilt pattern may be formulaic and the violin must conform to absolute standards as to shape, use of materials, and production of sound. Yet, each quiltmaker or violinmaker seeks to leave a stamp of personal style and craftsmanship as part of the finished artifact. Likewise, the goal of each fanartist is to have his or her work immediately recognized in terms of content and then recognized and applauded based on his or her demonstration of a distinctive personal style.

The goal of cosplay, on the other hand, is to recreate the image and persona of the intended character as closely and accurately as possible. Family members seemed willing to teach the skills of costume making without the judgmental encumbrances that troubled fanartists. Cosplay respondents were appreciative of learning sewing skills in art or home economics classes, when those opportunities were available to them. Although the costumes worn by cosplayers are intended as accurate reproductions of the original author's descriptions or artist's depictions, the ingenuity required in order to make these costumes and body appurtenances seem 'real' prompted art teachers to view costume making as an acceptable artistic endeavor.

Of What Importance in Fanart or Cosplay to Your Life?

What is it in a subject that so fascinates the fanartist as to compel him or her to create fanart? Why would cosplayers wish to dress and act as characters from the favorite popular story? When this question was put to fanartists and cosplayers of this study, they described pleasures of engaging with great stories and fascinating characters, viewing images that were aesthetically pleasing, exploring and understanding human psychology or their own inner lives, and entering the real experience of a fantasized world. Fanart and cosplay engagements added a richer dimension to the fans' lives and for more than two-thirds of the respondents provided escape from boring, humdrum, or stressful everyday lives. Nearly 70% of the respondents in this study described their fanart making or cosplay activities as escapist in nature. Life-enhancing benefits of fandom participation and fanart making were described by persons, whose careers were devoted to creating 'legitimate' forms of art. For example, Charlene, a twenty-one year old graphic designer in Great Britain writes, "It's a hobby, it's relaxing and fun; it's not another bloody boring piece of graphic design done for another person; it's a tiny personal bit of art drawn only for one person, me!" The responses to this question seemed to suggest that fanart and cosplay engages the senses and emotions in a kind of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991) that is intrinsically satisfying but might not otherwise be experienced in these respondents' everyday lives.

What Professional Hopes or Expectations Do You Have?

Those, who had no intentions of becoming professional artists, indicated that they did plan to continue creating and improving their art or costume making skills because, as one cosplayer stated, "I would rather live in the make-believe world than real one". "It adds meaning to my real life," wrote one fanartist, who indicated that during periods of escape into the fandom universe, new possibilities might be imagined. Fanart creation contributed to Mary's ability to find balance in her life. She stated:

I used to want to go into animation or illustration as a career, but lately, I've realized I'm much happier when I draw for myself, There's no expectations, I work at my own pace, and in the end, I've only got myself to please—and I am always my toughest critic. I don't ever see myself doing this for a living, Art is my way of dealing with life; I don't want to turn it into my source of living.

Cosplayers described similar desires to escape through playacting the roles of favorite characters. Interestingly however, a higher percentage (68%) of cosplayers did aspire to careers as clothing or costume designers. Perhaps, the higher likelihood that art and home economics teachers and

family members might be accepting of costume making might account for cosplayers' decisions to pursue careers in fashion and costume design.

Convergence and Divergence; Private and Collective

Ordinary people may be understood as creators of popular culture, insofar as they choose from ephemera presented and select that which, consequently, is elevated to popular culture (Fiske, 1989). The cultural commodities embraced by the masses may be seen as an indication of a shared ideology (Fiske, 1989) or of efforts by ordinary folk to reclaim and re-order repressive social conditions (Zipes, 2002/1979). Critics of popular culture, and observers of fandoms and online fan communities (de Certeau, 2002; Jenkins, 1992; Rushkoff, 1996) suggest these participatory activities as resistance—a means of reclaiming autonomy from the control of bourgeoisie society. This was suggested in reports by fanartists, for example, who had learned the skills required of fanart making surreptitiously or from those not associated with formal education, since many teachers and instructors (as representatives of the art and educational bourgeoisie) discouraged or forbade the creation of fanart and ignored cosplay as an artform.

While a few respondents indicated having been introduced to comics, books, or movies by friends or acquaintances, more commonly the intense attraction to a particular phenomenon of popular culture was a personal decision that set the fan apart from others of his or her real local community. Some fanartists and cosplayers were cautious about whom they shared their interests and creations with. They sought out others of like interests online, often revealing themselves—even in these safe environs—only through pseudonyms. Yet, in spite of the possibility of ridicule or alienation from the real social community they were willing to engage in fanart and cosplay because these activities were intensely satisfying.

The purpose of fanart and cosplay was not to lose one's sense of self in the pop-culture story or character, but to *find* oneself. The character that was drawn repeatedly or imitated in cosplay presented an *instructive* archetype. During adolescence it might serve as a mask or shield behind which one could find shelter while trying out various ways of being and developing a coherent, competent, and empowering internal self. More often, however, characterization of a known fictive served as reference point and attraction for fans from many nations, cultures, and background in a community dedicated to intellectual and ideological discourse about a shared interest. Within the fandom, youth appreciated getting to know those of diverse cultures and nations. They saw these global interactions as opportunities to learn about the aesthetic ideas, stylistic techniques, and art making skills of others. They celebrated individual stylistic divergence from original models and came to appreciate and draw upon their own local traditions as worthy of being shared with others.

Teaching and Learning Art for the 21st Century

These findings should matter to art educators in several significant ways. First it is noteworthy that the intense engagement with a particular phenomenon of popular culture, as fan behavior, is commonly aroused during early adolescence, among youth who are between 12 and 14 years of age. This is the age during which many youth seem to lose interest in formal art education. Secondary students often drop out of art or elect not to take high school level art classes. Perhaps, these students find other academic subjects more interesting, challenging, or beneficial to their future careers. Art educators, however, recognize that waning interests in art learning occurs simultaneously with the transition from schematic developmental stage of art representation to a stage that (according to theorists) recognizes and values realism. Youth who have not mastered competent skills of realistic representation may lose interest in formal art instruction. Evidences of fanart and cosplay activities and expressions suggest that interests in visual arts and engagements with art making may continue well past early adolescence, even among those who do not see themselves as artists and/or may not enroll in art classes. Traditions of teaching art in incremental, sequential steps grounded in the elements and principles, of art as

discrete building blocks, are seen by some of these adolescents as hindering art understanding. They describe this way of learning ponderous, and point out that art is not about the elements and principles of design so much as the elements and principles of *aesthetic meaning* (Manifold, 2005). These youth suppose they might have benefited from art education if they had been permitted to appropriate and apply conventions and schema that would have allowed the audiences of their works to immediately recognize the external subject matter. The goal of such an exercise would have been to move past problems of representing realistic concrete objects in order that the development of unique styles of representation and subtle ways of expressing that which is within, beneath, or behind the superficial appearance of the subjects be encouraged. Appropriate content for the art instruction of adolescents and young adults would still focus on complex themes, issues, and narratives, but these could be masked in the guise of stories, films, comics, or other narrative artifacts of popular culture.

The second reason art teachers might attend to these findings has to do with realization that half of those youth who create art based on interests of popular culture do not see themselves as pursuing careers in art. This suggests an audience of creative individuals who may be missing from the formal art studio. It cannot be assumed that those who eschew art as a valued subject of formal education devalue arts importance in their lives. Art for many individuals may, in fact, be too precious to be shared with those who would not value it as dearly. For those who desire to engage in art making in the private recesses of their lives, art programs might be designed as online environments, where students of like-interests could advertise their interests through *avatars* (i. e., the small image or icon an Internet user posts as way of identifying him- or herself to others) and work together in small cadres, that are shielded from the gaze of the disinterested. In these private sites, learners might be gently challenged and guided by teachers who are willing to be led by the needs and desires of the students, rather than by the dictates of scripted curriculums.

Fan youth desire socio-aesthetic interactions with people with whom they share common interests. They are active participants, manipulators, adapters, and creators of popular culture, and desire to be acknowledged, accepted, and respected as contributing to the vital culture of their local and global communities. Unfortunately, they may understand teachers of art as condemning the purposes for which they practice and master art making skills. It would behoove art educators to consider the purposes of popular culture in the lives of adolescents, and the ways youths interact with peers locally and globally as the teachers design art curricula for adolescent students. For art educators who have reservations about the propriety of appropriating or adapting original materials from commercial authors and artists, and for educators who understand multicultural art education as study of artworks created by exclusive cultural groups, questions about boundaries between consumers and creators of culture may need to be ameliorated. Fanartists and cosplayers are unabashed about reproducing the imagic products of commercial producers^{xvi} and challenged to appropriate aesthetic styles from many cultures. If this disturbs art educators who see their role as nurturing originality of expression, these art educators should be reassured that the ultimate goal of fanart and cosplay is not imitation but the finding of a unique expressive style.

As fans from diverse geographies meet and share interests in a common phenomenon of popular culture, global aesthetics converge, and become available to youth as malleable tools of divergent expression. Rather than prohibit fan activities and expressions in the art classroom, art teachers might see this play among culture creatives as a site of teaching and learning. Students might be prompted to recognize the historic roots of various aesthetic ideas, processes, techniques, and genres, and be encouraged to search the traditions of their local communities for unique traditions and variants of expression worthy of contribution to the lexicon of aesthetics used by fans. Finally, just as distinctions between audiences and artists, consumers and creators of culture, public façade and private self, and converging or diverging cultures are being blurred,

the roles of teacher and students are inexact. Those youth who are creating culture *outside* the classroom, may have much to teach us about how to teach *within* the classroom.

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ⁱ A fandom is a group of people who share an adoring fascination with a particular subject or phenomenon and are voluntarily interconnected in a social network that shares information about the subject of interest. “Fans typically are interested in even minor details of the object(s) of their fandom and spend a significant portion of their time and energy involved with their interest; this is what differentiates them from those with only a casual interest”

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fandom>)

ⁱⁱ The study was funded in part by a Proffitt Research Grant from Indiana University, School of Education.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.cosplay.com/>

^{iv} <http://www.deviantart.com/>

^v <http://elfwood.lysator.liu.se/elfwood.html>

^{vi} <http://www.the-leaky-cauldron.org/fanart/>

^{vii} <http://www.fanart-central.net/>

^{viii} For purposes of brevity, the actual questions have been condensed.

^{ix} All the respondents also indicated that the major reason for interest was the pleasure they received from this activity and had little to do with either self-discovery or exploration of others. This suggests that the interactions of individuals (i.e. social interactions) are in and of themselves inherently fascinating to fans.

^x There are many subgroups within any given fandom. These subgroups present specific variations of the major theme or story. For example, fanartists of the *chibi* subgroup depict cute, chubby animé/manga style renditions of their fandom topic. There are chibi style Harry Potter

and Superman images. *Slash* is another subgroup category. Slash writers, fanartists, and cosplayers present male characters of the popular narrative in non-canonical love relationships.^{xi} Although 35% percent mentioned have received some benefit from formal art education, only 2 of the respondents were complimentary of the knowledge acquired through their formal art training. A staggering 65% were either altogether condemning or dismissive of art education as a learning resource.

^{xii} In a single example of teacher support, Mara, a Puerto Rican high school student, related that she and her art teacher became “best friends” after she discovered that they shared an interest in fanart.

^{xiii} *Bullfight: Death of the Torero* (1933), Pablo Picasso, The Musee Picasso, Paris. Oil on Wood panel, 324 X 40 cm.

^{xiv} Sirius Black is a favorite character from the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling.

^{xv} In fact, fanartists’ biggest complaint against other fans is the improper behavior of copying the styles of other fanartists. Replication of original source material is not seen as copying—because the true fanartist attempts to reproduce the images in an original style.

^{xvi} Increasingly commercial producers are recognizing the commercial *value* of fans and are negotiating ways to allow fans to appropriate and manipulate their materials (Jenkins, 2006).