

The Goth Explosion in Science Fiction Culture

[Camille Bacon-Smith, Ph.D.](#)

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When people want to know why I would write a book about science fiction culture (fandom), the first question they usually ask is, "What makes fandom different from any other group?" As if difference was the only criterion for interesting. My answer, by contrast, is, "Nothing makes it different. That is the point." The larger mechanics of mainstream American culture play out in a relatively small, defined setting. So we can let go of the fantasy we used to hold that studying small villages in low- technology settings give us insights into a computer-driven, high speed, population dense techno-culture. We can find groups of ourselves small enough to study right here. And the mechanics of power and status, of change and conflict, will often play themselves out in speeded-up time that we can watch; we can figure out the dynamics in small. And it turns out those observations in small apply well to the larger society.

Like the rest of the culture in which it resides, fandom has experience the women's movement and the backlash, and the rise of lesbian and gay self determination. And, in the late eighties and early nineties, fandom experienced the invasion of the goths. This is the story of that invasion, and how we have made our children the thing we fear.

Beating At The Gates

Drawn by cyberpunk and vampire literature and the mutating role playing game world, gothic youth began to make an appearance in the science fiction convention circuits in the late 1980s, and the new battle for the identity of science fiction culture, based on age and style, was engaged. The presence of goth youth in fandom has created a generational schism so profound that old-line fans in the '90s have found themselves in a strange state of publicly declared denial. At most conventions today, you will find panels that ask, "Where are the young science fiction fans?" while at the same time denouncing the young goth fans as a scourge on the face of the community. I wondered, though, how the young raised to traditional science fiction culture viewed the incursion, so I asked longtime informant and second generation fan JB, who did not sport goth display, but who knew many of the players on both sides of the divide, what he thought about the newcomers.

JB: The kids in black leather...very often severe makeup? Yes, the goth community is what they're usually called around here. [sigh] I know a lot of them...They started out all severe, it's become a cultural lifestyle for them, and they've actually, in their own gothic way, mellowed out a lot...I knew Amelia G. when she was still at Wesleyan in Middletown, Connecticut, had a good Jewish last name...

Ethnographer: So they are not really alien to this place.

JB: Not to me. Then again, at Disclave, two Disclaves ago... there was this big debate on the steps, I think it was Red Steve fighting against Joe [a fan in his fifties] ..."why are you here..." It is the same sort of alienation thing that got most everyone into fandom in the first place...[F]or some people it's turned into dress in black leather, look dangerous, wear ammunition around my neck...[I]t is the same alienation that got Joe into fandom lo these many years ago, only it's more modern and he's doing generation gap things. One of the biggest problems, they're noticeable, they're visible, and hotels don't like them, which is always a problem....They smoke a lot.

Hotels always present some difficulty for science fiction conventions. Fans run on a time schedule very different from that of traditional business meetings; they dress differently, even have a different eating schedule, and hotels may be hostile to changing their routines to suit the customers who spend a lot in the coffee shop, but very little in the expensive restaurant, and not much more in the bar.

Goths add several inconveniences for hotels already unhappy about changing their routines: while fans in general look strange to them, most hotel staff find goths terrifying. The goths of science fiction, sometimes called cyberpunks, travel in groups and settle in the bar or lobby, where their style of dress is variously read as violent and destructive in the sense of motorcycle gangs, or sexually deviant in the sense of sadomasochism.

Valerie Steele, in her study on fetish clothing, points briefly to the goths, punks, and cyberpunks as fashion cultures that borrow the clothing of the fetishist as fashion. The use of fetish clothing as fashion does not necessarily indicate a fetishistic attachment to that fashion, but the use of fetish clothing by Goths and cyberpunks is ambiguously threatening to traditional science fiction fans and to the personnel in the hotels that serve the convention circuits.

When I first saw the goths appear in numbers at conventions, they scared me as much as they scared everyone else. They would appear, en masse, dressed in leather and chains--chains on boots and jackets, as jewelry, including the occasional chain linking pierced hoops in lips, noses, ears, or eyebrows--long hair, black tee shirts touting death bands on the men, leather bustiers on the women, tattoos, and in-your-face jewelry of religious inversion. They would land somewhere in the lobby, mix little, greet tentative approaches with suspicion, and generally spread a smoke-sharp pall of the apocalypse on the event. But in Cockeysville, Maryland, in 1993, armed with Jbs assurance that the goths really were just like us only in dog collars instead of propeller beanies, I decided to find out what the goths were really about.

Balticon 1993

Balticon had always seemed a convention more friendly to gamers and media fans than most traditional conventions in the Northeast. For costumers, Balticon was the center of activity on the Eastern Seaboard. When I began attending Balticons, they were held in downtown Baltimore, but in 1993 they were back at the Hunt Valley Inn, in Cockeysville, a popular hotel used by many media conventions as well as Balticon. Shore Leave, which attracted about 800 participants when I attended them in the '80s, fit comfortably into the hotel, and the staff seemed to cope well with the fans and their schedules.

But Balticon, with a membership of 2,000, was a very different story. While sleeping rooms were divided between two main hotels, all of the programming and sanctioned parties occurred at the Hunt Valley, which did

not have sufficient space to put the people. Science fiction writer S. N. Lewitt, a member of the goth community had explained that nearby Washington, D.C., was well known for its large goth "scene," and many of the goths were also fans. So, I was not surprised when Friday night the goths took over the bar in numbers that effectively shut out both the science fiction professionals and their fans for the duration of the convention.

Later Friday evening we met goth live action game designer Red Steve in the con suite. Lewitt introduced us, and I asked what books he liked to read. Not surprisingly, Bill Gibson was high on his list. More surprising, C.J. Cherryh was also on his list. In fact, his favorites might grace the shelf of any science fiction fan. Red Steve, as mentioned above, had co-created The Zone, a live action role playing game based on a cyberpunk universe for enacting at conventions. He had a game planned for Saturday night at Balticon as part of the convention activities.

The connection of goths to horror and vampire fiction seemed axiomatic, but I had known in a general way for quite some time about the attraction of cyberpunk for the goths. I did not understand it, but couldn't help but notice that the numbers of goth fans at conventions seemed to pace the growing popularity of the subgenre. Gibson's cyberpunk universe reflects the dark outlook of the goths, and features hackers in leather, an amalgam of symbolic worlds I had recognized but thought strange until I talked to Amelia G. and Forrest Black during a group interview that included S.N. Lewitt and another housemember, Sarah, at Hollowpoint. Forrest Black and Amelia G. both worked in the computer industry. Black did LAN contracting for major federal projects, and as part of his job he configured their networks and worked on the system architecture. Amelia G. was a freelance computer graphics contractor who also worked on government and private contracts. I asked Black and Amelia G. about the crossover between hacker culture and vampires:

Amelia G.: I think it's just an age thing... people who are more likely to have been hackers when they were twelve couldn't have done it until there were, like, home computers. So it's partly like a generational thing.

Ethnographer: That explains the computers, but where did the vampire thing come in?

Amelia G.: The vampire thing, I think, is partly, it's something that cycles, as far as, like, interest in that type of mythology, and I think it's just been on an upswing that's coincided with people who are about the right age to have been hackers at some point, or who, just, perhaps, are still hackers. Although, almost no one you will talk to will actually say that they are a hacker now...

Black: I think there might actually be some kind of...reason behind a crossover between a hacker culture and a more gothic culture. Because generally speaking, hacker-type people, well, they're antisocial because they spend a lot of time at home with their computer, and...they have a personality type, in my opinion, that would gravitate toward a more gothic kind of, like, black, whatever, person...

Amelia G.: I know that I spend an awful lot of time home on my computer. And what I do all day at work is I like, sit around with a mouse in my hand, and I come home, and what I do is with a mouse in my hand. And every once in a while we go out, and I have to say I have a pretty, like, black outlook on it.

Black: Yeah, it might actually be something to do with just a

biochemical, like, reaction to the fact that, well, gee, I stay up all night, I hide in my basement, and I don't come out very often. Ergo...

So, hackers and the goth sensibility seemed to come together in a vaguely dark and romantic vision of vampire lovers and the fantasy, or memory, of the excitement Bill Gibson evokes about moving through other people's computer systems. The fiction resonates with the sense of dark futility of the goth sensibility, and has given the new generation of smart kids and computer nerds an image to copy that projected the sense of romance:

Ethnographer: How did hackers find style?

Black: I think, they looked around and they said, well, who's got a date and who doesn't? The ones that were smart...that look around, they go, who looks cool? And they find their little examples of...that, you know, industrial gothic guy or whatever is like all cool or whatever.

Amelia G.: he's getting all those babes with the leather bras on. "I could take some of that."

Black: Seriously. Absolutely. And you look around, you don't find too many other examples...your normal attractive, sportsmanly kind of guy is not going to be there, because it's just a different culture, so they're gonna look around, they're gonna say, well, these cool people are, they're able to get dates or whatever, so perhaps I should emulate their style. And it is a style that works very well for hackers because they don't get a lot of sun. And so--And they use a lot of stimulants to stay up all night, so...just works.

Amelia G.: They look haggard?

Ethnographer: Haggard and edge.

Black: Exactly. So, they decided that maybe they should buy black jeans instead of blue jeans, and maybe they should wear like, whatever, and it just sort of develops into something where someone would be into a sort of a gothic vampiry look, and a hacker-type person. And also, vampires, theoretically, mythologically, or whatever, are fairly intelligent, and they like to be able to say, "I am intelligent and I have style."

Surprisingly, while they did enjoy the gothic and industrial sound, among other types of music, none of the goths I talked to pointed to the music as the source of their look even though Goth music, a dirgelike rock with infusions from industrial and heavy metal, forms the base for goth culture in general:

Amelia G.: I guess I am counterculture. But to me some of the identifications on that are very--they're very fashion conscious, And I don't identify very strongly with one group. You know, it would be kind of cool if I did, but I don't. I think that's the reason why I am so aggressively alienated.

Though music did not seem to be the center of the gothic identity for these participants, all of the sources for the look of Cambodia/Hollowpoint can be found in the science fiction culture of horror fantasy and cutting-edge near-time science fiction and the mythology of darkness and intelligence that the horror and vampire fantasies project.

Amelia G.: As a kid I read predominantly, like, either

medieval-type based fantasy stuff, fairy tales, and like, those stories about the one little boy who tames the wild stallion, but no one else can ride it. I don't think it's a big stretch from like, knights in shining armor to, like, hot boys in black studded leather.

Sarah: I think part of the reason I like leather, and this is weird, is that, when I was a very little girl I spent most of my time at the stables, and, like, all the equipment was leather, and it makes me feel good to smell leather. It makes me feel like I'm a little kid again, it makes me happy. That's why I like leather, and I transfer feeling happy to everything, you know, anything that makes me happy is good...

There is clearly a flirtation the sexual aspects of leather symbolism, but the style represents a youth-cultural construct created out of a wide variety of sources all using certain symbols in common for meanings both divergent from and tangential to each other. Importantly, *all* of the meanings seem to frighten the locals.

Balticon--its hotel filled well beyond its capacity, its most prominent and public gathering place appropriated by the group marked for difference by age, sensibility, dress, and public behavior, including heavy smoking indoors--was heading for disaster by Saturday night. Typical of anthropologists everywhere, I wanted to understand the impending doom, so I wandered through the bar to find out what these "foreigners" were doing in the territory they had seized.

I found one group collating a zine, another group discussing the latest Bill Gibson, and another strategizing for the game on later that night. Many were having private conversations, just as the traditional fans would do. But they all eyed me suspiciously as I wandered through. I complimented one young woman on her black lace dress. It took her a moment to realize that I meant it, that I was not being hostile, but then she smiled and thanked me, making a comment about its construction. In a sense, as Forrest Black and Amelia G. intimated, goth is guerrilla theater as lifestyle, and clothing is very much costume as well. It seemed, when I looked past my own fear of difference, that fandom was going on here much the same as it went on in more traditional fan groups. JB was right.

Fire Alarms

On Saturday, amid the chaos of overcrowding and late-night activities, the fire alarm went off twice. The first alarm was initially attributed to the goths, either as a malicious prank or as the inadvertent result of the smoke level, but was quickly determined to be an accident caused by a workman trying to repair the system. The second brought in the fire marshal, who closed down the public spaces of the convention because of the overcrowding in the lobbies, hallways, and bar. While the Goths were no more at fault for the overcrowding than any other group meeting at the convention, they were blamed for setting off the fire alarms that drew the fire marshal and resulted in the shutdown on Saturday night. According to convention organizers there was considerable damage to one hall, and management told the convention that it could not return the next year.

In the aftermath, much of the science fiction community put the blame for the disasters on the goths, and indeed one thing should be stressed: this group, like many other young people today, smokes

quite heavily. Much news media attention has focused on the rise in smoking among the young, the effects of advertising geared to the young, and the fact that smoking is suddenly hip again, and the goth community are certainly not immune to the effects. The smoke, on which many of the specific complaints focused, was indeed so dense that when the fire alarm went off for the first time, it was difficult to determine if there was actually a fire in the building, if the smoke from the cigarettes had set off the alarms, or if someone had set off the alarms with malicious intent and the smoke had no bearing on the alarms. None of the above proved true, of course: a repairman hit the wrong switch by accident. The second alarm went off in all five wings at midnight--too well timed to be anything less than a deliberate prank. The goths, different because of their age, their dress, and because of the defensiveness of some members of the group, became the obvious target for the blame. But I had a secret weapon for getting to know the goths.

I'd known writer S. N. Lewitt casually for a number of years. I often noticed her goth clothing style and I'd seen her with the goths from time to time. By 1992, well before the Balticon crisis, we had begun to discuss Cambodia, the goth house with which she and a number of the core convention-going goths of the D. C. area were associated. This discussion continued via e-mail for about six months, well into 1993, and part of it is recreated here:

Lewitt: For the first year, the living room of Cambodia was truly, really, the coolest place in the D. C. area...Any night you could count on seven to ten people there playing games, reading, listening to music, trying to figure out what to do to offend general society...Within the first few months Johnny made the first bullet necklaces. They are still a symbol of being Cambodian...

Anyway, the second year the projects started. Amelia and I began *BLT* [*Black Leather Times*, a zine about the doings of the house group]. Red Steve began the Zone, a LARP [live action role playing game]...

Yeah, the whole crowd wears a lot of black and talks nasty, but a large number no longer quite are...this is no longer the active center of a community, but just another group house with a lot of people who have a lot of leather.

Armed with this information, I had approached the group at Balticon. A few months later, I had a chance to talk to some of the members of Cambodia, who had decamped to a large house in suburban Gaithersburg which they named Hollowpoint.

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Hollowpoint

In June of 1993, two months after Balticon, S. N. Lewitt arranged a meeting for me with some of the goths I had met in passing at the convention. I wanted the view from the other side, and I wanted to know what these young fans were about. Their large suburban house in Gaithersburg sat in a sea of mud and twigs that would someday be trees. The new house, named Hollowpoint after the ammunition, had wall-to-wall carpet, an inexpensive kitchen table and chairs, but little other furniture that I could see in the formal living room. Mail-order catalogues of computer accessories and leatherwear lay scattered on the table.

As described above, leatherwear is a complex of symbols, and I wanted to know which meanings the group ascribed to its own use of the clothing. The clothing reflects the literature to an extent, and Bill Gibson, author of [Neuromancer](#), is generally credited with making the hacker a sex symbol in science fiction literature. For goth culture, the leather, lace, velvet, and dead white makeup all represent variously the apocalyptic worldview represented in the music and the literature of cyberpunk and vampires.

I wanted to know about convention-going from the other side of the goth divide. How did the hostility affect these people, and why did they continue in the face of such rejection? The group I spoke with included a nineteen-year-old woman the group had taken in when she was an underage runaway, Sarah, Amelia G., Forrest Black. The group said they attended about five conventions a year, but:

Amelia G: Maybe only two or three for the whole weekend, for me, but a lot of times like stopping in. You know, walking around, getting hassled by a bunch of people, and going, man, I hate this. Let's go. Do something else.

Amelia G.'s comment gave me the opening I had hoped for. I asked if they had experienced any trouble at Balticon.

Amelia G.: Well, I know that I personally was folding BLTs with a bunch of people. And we weren't being loud, and we weren't being rude, and we were just, like, sitting in a corner, and like, [management came in and said,] "We are closing this whole section down." But for the most part I just felt pretty alienated from it.

Black: But my personal little beef, and one of the reasons why I run into problems every freaking time I go to one of these conventions, is because I do not personally appreciate the split between the old school sort of swords and sorcery fantasy like furry creature people and the newer school technology science people...there are bad examples and good examples on both sides, of, like, appropriate and inappropriate behavior, but as far as like a split goes, it is not a healthy one, and it is feeding entirely too much animosity.

Black is not just speaking of the fantasy/science fiction distinction, which has been part of the community almost since its inception, but also a specifically contemporary split between the fans of traditional forms of far-future spaceship science fiction and the fans of the new near-future science fiction based on computer infrastructure. The distinction is not only fundamental to the aesthetics, but crucial to the worldview the form represents--the glowing positivistic optimism that fuels the notion of space flight, alien encounters, and Yankee Ingenuity versus the dark and inverted vision of a decaying society ruled by the technologically privileged while the technological underclass hacks at the bastions of that power with its security bypass software.

Of course, the underdog of cyberpunk is not the true underclass, which has no access to high technology or to the training that makes it possible to wield that technology. But the creators of cyberpunk brought to the form a sensibility out of the previous generation's rebellion--the drugs, sex, rock and roll Weathermen Underground set to the tune of a new technology. That creation captured the imaginations of the twelve-year-old hackers, girls like Amelia G. who still remember the boys who wouldn't let her join the computer club when she was thirteen, and boys like Forrest Black made wary of government by direct contact with its downside. Cyberpunk resonates with the frustration of the technologically privileged young oppressed by virtue of their age or appearance. Ironically, the community that created the form that expresses the needs and feelings of the cybergothic generation denies what it has created while it rejects the sensibilities of the group that responds to its message most keenly. And the rejection still hurts.

Black: There's actually only so motivated to be around people I can get. And if I go somewhere, and a bunch of people say I'm a bad person and label me, like, outcast or whatever, I'll leave ...they only have so much programming that actually appeals to me personally so it's not like I can just ignore the people in the hallway because I'm running from place to place. Generally I'm just hanging out with a bunch of people. Except I feel as though I am sort of looked down upon as not having the proper qualifications to associate with that group of people. It bothers me.

Amelia G.: ...I haven't done fandom stuff across the country, but ... I think that the Northeast cons have, sort of the tension, but it's much more between "I read books," "Well, I go to movies and I'm good looking," "Well I read books and I'm intelligent." And that's the split there, sort of, whereas, it's sort of, the mid-Atlantic, it's much more of like a fashion thing. It's like, I'm fat and I wear spandex so I'm intelligent. And I'm thin and I wear leather, so obviously I don't read, right? It's more stylistic.

And we've been doing a few DeepSouthCons lately, which I had a lot of fun at mostly because none of our nasty little "friends" were there...I'm sure there is probably some tension like that.. but I didn't particularly see it. It seemed like it was a much more easygoing thing. I didn't feel that anybody was "you know, what's wrong with you, why aren't you like that?" But that may be just because most of the pros in that area are people who are more likely to run around with leather jackets but were also capable of using a computer, so they can relate to where I am at, so I just didn't feel alienated on account of how it was some other group, other than me, that was alienated there.

Much of the negative stereotyping in fandom centers around the issue of reading the genre fiction. Media fans, and many women fans in general during the '80s, were stereotyped as nonreaders, present either to celebrate

television science fiction or to pick up the more intelligent men. So I was not inclined to believe the same claim against the goths when I heard it a few short years later. I wanted to know, in their own words, what the goths really did read, and how far their tastes in the genre diverged from the more traditionally clad fan. The only difference I found at all was a continuing appreciation for cyberpunk, which had been declared dead by Hartwell and the originators the same year.

Amelia G.: I really really like cyberpunk, but I guess because they decided that it wasn't, I don't know, economically in vogue or whatever this year, there hasn't been anything that is any good.

Black: I think it's because the powers that be are scared of it, personally.

Amelia G.: ...the whole cyberpunk thing attracted a lot of people into fandom that some of the people who were really big in fandom would have really preferred stayed away from it.

Amelia G. had been interested in science fiction and fantasy as a child, but had lost interest until--

Amelia G.: ...the whole cyberpunk thing really pulled me back into the whole science fiction genre, which I had gotten really tired of. It was something new and vital and exciting that I could relate to. It was a view of the world that spoke to me. I absolutely adore William Gibson. His prose is so dense, there's so much in it, like, it's worth actually reading the whole paragraph and not skimming. I really like [George Alec] Effinger too.

Black: Some of the cyberpunk stuff is about the only fiction I can bring myself to read. I really like nonfiction. When I was a kid, I was, I guess, theoretically classifiably disadvantaged or whatever. When I looked around, I saw a lot of my friends, like, smoking a lot of dope and just getting into a whole big fantasy thing. And I looked at their parents and they just weren't ever going to change. And I didn't want to end up like that. So...if I am reading something that's completely fiction, I'm like, wasting my time. Unless it's particularly good and has things like archetypes and something that I can learn like a structure and theory, or whatever... But some of the cyberpunk stuff I can read because of the fact that I really like the whole network theory and stuff like that, because it's things that I can relate to and I can actually apply.

Sarah: I read the Belgariad literally, like, twenty times...I was so into it. I really loved, but I got really tired of it after a while, and now every book I read that's fantasy, it's just the same. Right now, my most recent, you know, one of my favorite books is by Orson Scott Card--*Ender's Game*. I've read it like five times in six months.

So the goths at science fiction conventions do read science fiction and fantasy. And they play role playing games like *The Zone*, based on the cyberpunk science fiction genre. And they create zines and do all the other things that committed science fiction fans do. Still, and particularly in the conservative climate of the conventions on the East Coast, the group is stereotyped and rejected, blamed for disasters and generally disliked both by other fans and even many professionals in the field, for whom alienating a reading population would seem a risky business. Accordingly, I asked the obvious question: why do you go to conventions?

Black: You're asking me? Uh, 'cause my friends like to go. Sometimes, I believe that being antisocial is a bad thing and that I

ought to go out and try to make some little friends and converse with people with some more interests and whatever. And sometimes I forget that they are mean to me when I do that...some of the techie people are interesting to talk to, and they're hard to dig up if you're not actually in their face. There are a few resources there that are worthwhile, but for the most part every time I go, I remind myself that I have no reason to be there. So I'm not entirely sure what draws me there.

Of course, Black does have a good reason to be there, and the reason itself demands the response it receives. Science fiction fandom reflects the larger culture's discomfort with the gothic-leather-punk manifestation of youth culture and its need to commodify the fetishist, to contain him. It is harder to contain the cyberpunk in science fiction because the number of youth flaunting the dark and dangerous leather look is sufficient to mark an overpowering presence rather than an occasional anomaly. The mainstream of fandom responds accordingly, with fear and even hatred, much as the generations of power have always feared youth cultures.

Youth culture represents the Oedipal confrontation at its heart, the fear the old have at the peak of their powers that they will lose everything to age and decline as the usurpers displace them in their hard-won position to set the norms for the culture. Every generation passing into dominance recognizes the need to seduce the young to their point of view. If the young, in winning, overturn the values of the literary generation that went before, they deny that generation's bid for immortality in the pantheon of the arts.

The extremes of youth culture--the hippies of the '60s, the punks and the goths and leather crowd of the '90s--express in their clothing and personal style the failure of the older generation to win the battle against age and a new sensibility. But more importantly, the Oedipal dance pivots around a focal symbol of power: sexuality. When it borrows from a wide variety of sexual subcultures that have long been deemed threatening by the mainstream, the leather crowd adopts the symbolic power to threaten that those subcultures have attached to the clothing.

Science fiction has long prided itself on creating the future that we live in. With cyberpunk, that hubris has come home to roost. Writers, creating a cultural milieu of the computer out of the bits and pieces of the high and low tech, fetish and biker and militant power of leather, and perhaps more significantly borrowing from the body piercing of punk to sexualize the penetration of the body with the technology, have created their own Oedipal sons and daughters.

Dragon Con

When I talked to youth culture fans, the the Atlanta convention Dragon Con often came up as an example of a friendly convention. With a total number of attendees at more than 19,000 and growing, Dragon Con is one of the largest fan run conventions in the world, yet it seems to cope with the youth invasion without suffering the meltdown of some of the tradition-bound convention sites in the Northeast Corridor.

In spite of this success, many organizers of regional and World conventions, spurn Dragon Con and speak scathingly of its organizer, Ed Kramer. In November of 1994, to find out who Ed Kramer was and why half the people I spoke to thought he was the god of conventions for the youth culture while the other half considered him a charlatan, I called Ed Kramer on the telephone. I wanted to know what he was doing, and how he did it.

When we first talked, Kramer had a day job with a grant contractor in the

health care field. He now holds a position writing grants and directing technology for a branch of the Georgia Department of Education. He explained that Dragon Con relied on the efforts of an army of volunteers. The convention does have an office and they do pay an office manager, who answers the phones and maintains the organization's 67,000-person database, but the work of actually putting on the convention is performed by the volunteers.

When I pointed out that other conventions have suffered some serious burnout in their volunteer committees, Kramer explained that his fifty-four area directors have autonomy for their area of the convention, and that the committee places in directorships people with professional or avocational expertise in their area. The area directors can then recruit volunteers and make the best use of them. Dragon Con has more volunteers than most regional conventions have attendees, and organizers bring to it not only their years of experience, but also an established reputation with the hotels and providers they work with every year.

Some old-school fans had complained that Dragon Con was not really a science fiction convention but a comic book show. Ed Kramer vehemently insisted that Dragon Con is a science fiction convention, but admits that his definition may be more flexible than that of traditionalists:

You have to include all facets of science fiction and fantasy. You also have to include all the modalities in which you see them, which is not only in books, but you also see them in graphic novels, which are pronounced "comics" by people, you see them in computer games, you see them in movies. There's a whole category for the Hugos, for dramatic presentation.

True to his definition of the genre, Kramer's Dragon Con includes some 300 genre writers and artists, but also comics artists and writers and television and science fiction movie guests. The convention devotes one whole area of a hotel to gaming and also runs live action role playing games at the main hotel:

We generally also have six live games, which can be seen as interactive literature... We started out using the Society for Interactive Literature in 1989, and that has expanded a great deal. And probably about 4,000 fans will participate in live gaming activities... It doesn't occur at the gaming hotel because it is very foreign to the tradition of table-top gaming...It's far more theatrical...It involves a number of players who have been, I guess performers would be a better word, who develop incredible plotlines and performances and it is all really complex.

At Dragon Con, the live action participation fiction engages more participants than most conventions draw for all of their events combined, and keeping the con-goers busy seems to be Kramer's motto for a successful convention:

We actually begin live music and have open gaming and other areas of the convention begin Wednesday evening, and by noon of Thursday, the entire convention is in full swing...and the convention does not shut down until 5 P.M. on Sunday. We cram as much into the convention as we possibly can.

Kramer defends Dragon Con's position in literary science fiction as well as in areas such as gaming and comics:

There is as much science fiction programming as at a Worldcon: last year, over 550 hours' worth in eighteen program tracks. And, we

strive to make the guest list the best we can each year. I mean, we bring in a wide, diverse group of guests... And the thing is that people are multifaceted. There's so many science fiction fans who also play games, read comics, and watch movies...For example, Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess, who won the World Fantasy literary award for a comic book story in *Sandman*, or Alan Moore won a Hugo Award for the graphic novel, *The Watchman*.

With the names of these graphic novelists on the table, I pointed out what I'd noticed, that the program book contained many more names in the comics area than in science fiction. Kramer explained:

Many of the comic book guests...do not do programming. They are set up in an artists' alley, where they can be there and talk to people and meet people and sell their sketches. So, if you look at our programming at the conventions, it probably is almost 70 percent congruous with what would be at a more traditional SF convention.

Ultimately, of course, the interview came down to the big question: Why aren't the new generation of fans trashing your hotels if they are wreaking havoc as accused in Baltimore and Boston?

We had 19,000 fans this past year [1998], with no hotel or facility damage...And the reason why is because we provide for as wide an audience as possible. I try to bring in guests each year that are very diverse and basically meet the needs of the population that attends the convention.

Kramer avoids committee burnout by expanding the number of committee directorships to reduce the load on each volunteer, and also by giving his directors autonomy in their section of the convention, so no one is hindered from doing his or her job by a pyramid of authorization. And he plans for growth to avoid crowding in public spaces that can result in catastrophe:

How do we do this? We didn't start out with fifty-four directors we started out with a lot less....As the convention expands, we basically split up directorships. My background is in management. As the convention is expanding, I can recognize when we need to expand the facilities. And we have not stopped doing that. We do not let size get in the way. We are planning for a larger convention each and every year. In 1997 we made our transition into the Atlanta Market Center, which is the fourth largest convention facility in the country, and that is where we'll stay until our next expansion in 2001... What happens is that we have generally a 15 to 20 percent growth each and every year. So it happens gradually, and it gives us a better idea to know what we do for next year.

Unlike conventions that have planned future conventions based on past numbers, Dragon Con assumes an expanding population and increases its facilities accordingly. They separate activities so that fans with an interest in only one part of the convention can experience their part of the event without crossing heavily into the territory of other interest groups. And they take care of their staff. When I asked how Dragon Con attracts so many volunteers, he answered:

Because we treat them right... A staff member over the course of the convention may work four four-hour shifts--sixteen hours. The rest they may do as they like. We comp their memberships...[F]or any director that has an area that runs twenty-four hours a day, we provide them sleeping rooms. ...Anyone where we tell them that they have to be on property, we provide a hotel room for them.

Kramer seemed to have a formula for a successful convention in terms of staffing and space, but he was working to attract the very fans that some conventions were trying to expel. I wondered how he managed it, and why he succeeded where others had failed in providing for the new generation of fan:

That's because you haven't provided them with something that they consider appropriate. For example, [in 1994] one of the artists we brought in was James O'Barr, who wrote *The Crow*. Who is basically seen, very often, in a leather jacket, and he is very open about a lot of things you described, and he loves to talk. And he, by his choice, was set up in a room ten hours a day doing autographs. He brought down an entire gallery of his artwork--ten years' retrospective of his artwork, original art. We gave him an entire room, a small room, and he basically set up and signed autographs every day. And then we had the music that he wrote performed by a band called Trust Obey, which was the actual original soundtrack to *The Crow* graphic novel. And they did a live concert. James O'Barr has returned to Dragon Con every year since.

We actually have lots of live concerts at the convention. Aside from Trust Obey, other notables recording acts which have performed at Dragon Con include the Screaming Liederhosen, which is a jazz blues band that did all the background music for Ren and Stimpy; Loose Caboose from Boston, a reggae band, that performed with Mark Bode; Blue Oyster Cult's Eric Bloom that has performed with Michael Moorcock; the Flash Girls, with Emma Bull; live musical performances by John Shirley, John Skipp, Craig Spector, and Richard Christian Matheson; and such diverse band as Edgar Winter, Godhead, Glass Hammer, Man or Astroman, Trio Nocturna, ODK, the Neil Norman Orchestra, the Misfis, the Changelings, The Bloodhound Gang, and GWAR. We also have disc jockeys that play dance music all night. We close our dances down at six o'clock in the morning.

Kramer insists that the alternative and goth fans are interested in programming, if the programming is appropriate.

...goths tend to like horror programming. And we also have mainstream guests each year, like somebody like Eric Lustbader, from 1994, Clifford Stoll, Tom Clancy, Timothy Leary.

One thing Kramer seems to bring to Dragon Con is a level head and unflappable personality when it comes to the variety of fans who attend his convention:

I remember a few years ago, the security that the hotel provides, which is six marshals, got very concerned because there were about a dozen skinheads that were in our ballroom, basically getting ready for the concert to begin. And I said, in my entire history and knowledge of conventions, there's never been a problem with skinheads at a convention. They're here because they're probably just fans. And they sat there and listened and watched the show... and it's like, nothing happened. They were fans.

Dragon Con doesn't just cope with the young alternative and leather crowd; it actively courts them:

We advertise on the alternative radio stations. When I say alternative, I mean that are playing what's considered alternative music...and we have things for them.... See, the thing is, there's another convention that is local to us called Chattacon, which is in January, which is a

literary convention. Now, it's a fun literary convention. Southern conventions, I think, are a lot more fun than the northern ones are. There's just a different atmosphere to them. But in general, a vast majority of people who attend Chattacon also attend our convention. I guess what I'm trying to say is, the people who go to a...specifically literary convention find just as much at Dragon Con as they do at any other convention.

When Black and Amelia G. talk about the friendlier conventions in the South, they include Chattacon and Dragon Con among them. The conventions are themselves younger and still flexible, forming their traditions around the new youth rather than the generations of the '40s and '50s and '60s. But they form around new definitions of what makes a science fiction convention as well. In this new order, the creative value of interactive literature is recognized along with the virtuoso performances in the literary genre; the music and the art of the alternative lifestyle become part and parcel of the science fiction-fantasy package. In the simplest terms possible, they aren't mean to the sensitive kids and younger adults; acceptance meets appreciation in an expanding youth culture of science fiction in all its modalities.

Gothic Display And The Future Of Fandom

Ironically, of all the changes we have studied in science fiction culture, this is the only change in the community that could have been predicted based on the community's own history.

A predominately male youth culture, steeped in logical positivism and striving for professionalism, shaped the community in the '30s, and photographs of fans at conventions through the '50s show the men in suits and ties. In the '60s, the community faced major change as the countercultural young brought new ways of dressing, writing, and perceiving the world. Influenced by the same counterculture making itself felt in the generation at large, the dress code we now recognize as the norm for science fiction conventions--jeans, tee shirts with science fiction mottos or pictures, or the ethnic dress style of some women- replaced the suit and tie of the '50s convention-goer. The writing, called the New Wave, reflected the countercultural interests in the humanities, in social consciousness, and in sexual freedom.

The science fiction community had always held itself out to be a refuge for those who felt themselves alienated because of their superior intellect and sensibility, and the youth cultures that shaped science fiction during these and other, less marked, turning points in the fan/literature community were equally radical and alienated. But thirty years later in the fan and publishing communities, the counterculture of the '60 has mutated into a status quo that fears the new generation of "interlopers" based on their style of dress and interaction. The genres and their community stand at a dangerous crossroad, with yet another alien group to absorb in its diversity, or to turn its back on and risk becoming obsolete. Fandom will go on, in its new forms, in new places, but the generations that have gone before could be left behind, their numbers dwindling, to wonder where the new, young fans went.

They went to Dragon Con.

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Bibliography

- [The Goth Explosion in Science Fiction Culture](#) (article)
- [Pomofemmes Strike Back](#) (article)

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