

We're all geeks now

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [December 9, 2015](#) issue



FANDOM: The main exhibition floor at New York Comic Con 2015, which attracted a record 167,000 people. Photo © Karl Tsakos (via Creative Commons License)

I could have been at any academic conference—except that Cat Woman was on my left and a fully dressed hobbit was on my right. In front of me sat two zombies, a Japanese manga character, the Flash, and Hello Kitty.

I was attending a panel presentation on “Autobiography and Queer Comics” at the tenth annual New York Comic Con, the largest comics convention in North America. Comic Con includes mainstream comic books (e.g., Marvel and DC), indie comics, graphic novels, Japanese manga and anime, video games, and many other genres of television and film. If a pop culture object (show, book, game) has any element of fantasy or supernaturalism, however broadly defined, it’s probably represented at Comic Con. An insider catchall term for this is *geek media*.

People who love geek media are its fandom: *superfans*, *fanboys*, and *fangirls*. Scholars observing the phenomenon often use more religiously loaded terms like devotee or acolyte, and it’s not hard to see why. The level of intertextual criticism on superfan websites like Den of Geek, Black Girl Nerds, and Girl Gone Geek reminds me of a church father weaving scriptural references across the canon—only here the texts are gothic comics, graphic novels, and gaming strategies. As I listened to fans compare references to comic books in recent films and dissect favorite characters on fan fiction websites, I wondered if anything I teach would ever inspire such passion, commitment, and communal connectivity.

If faith functions in people's lives by shaping dispositions and motivations, inner states and external commitments, we can easily call this fandom religious or a substitute for religion.

To some degree we are all geeks now. The four major network channels (ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox) produce 17 of the shows represented at Comic Con. The list expands if we add basic cable (AMC and FX) and prestige TV (HBO, Showtime). The Entertainment Software Association estimates that 42 percent of all American households and nearly half of the online population worldwide play video games. Sociologist and media theorist Stig Hjarvard argues that citizens of postindustrial societies find the most significant experiences of enchantment in pop culture. In his studies of Danish culture, fantasy texts like Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, and the Chronicles of Narnia were eight times more likely to be named significant in shaping moral and spiritual ideas than the Bible or other traditional religious texts.

This is why I went to Comic Con: to learn about the religious nones or those who find their religion in hobbit costumes and manga fan clubs.

Then I found the panels, the subterranean heart of Comic Con, in the basement of the convention center. The panels revealed Comic Con as less alternative religious gathering and more professional convention. I learned that the line between professionals and fans becoming professionals is very thin. Many comic book authors get their start publishing on fan sites or indie blogs. They hope to receive frequent comments from other fans, as they may then be promoted to writing commissioned pieces. Superfan sites that support a full staff of paid professionals got their start as fan sites that analyzed and aggregated geek media for other fans.

The professional question is how to make money. Every panel I attended included this advice for fans: stick with it, put yourself out there, do the work even if you don't get paid, network, dream big, and one day you too can make a career out of your fandom.

I'm not sure what the fans thought of this advice, but I've heard it in other places—at roundtables and workshops on professionalism in grad school and at sessions on freelancing and “adjunctification” at American Academy of Religion meetings.

People are seeking transcendence at Comic Con. But they are also seeking something as mundane as a paycheck for meaningful work and a sense of vocation.

Professors who are caught in institutional shake-ups and vocational uncertainties understand this only too well.