

Chapter 16

The Futurians, Gamergate, and Fandom: The Construction of Social Identities Through Competition and Technology

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ABSTRACT

From the science fiction fan clubs of the 1930s to the modern gamers, devoted fans have found one another and formed groups bonded over their shared interest. As groups formed, social identities began to emerge, distinguishing ingroups and outgroups. Social identity theory helps to explain the formation of groups as well as inevitable competition over resources and power. As technology became more sophisticated, fans were able to communicate with greater ease facilitating ingroup social identification. The inherent properties of video games reinforce both the cooperation among ingroup members as well as the rivalry with outgroups. Understanding the mechanisms within video games as well as the affordances of CMC and social media help to explain the group dynamics that support the Gamergate social identity.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike the gatekeeping, one-to-many communication models of most media publishers in the 1920s, early science fiction publisher Hugo Gernsback created space for many-to-many dialogues in his magazine *Amazing Stories*. Through the letters pages, the editor often responded to fan queries as well as allowed for direct fan-to-fan communication (Knight, 1978). Gernsback, whether he knew it or not, was following a basic tenet of media communication theory: increasing the amount of available communication channels increases audience engagement. It worked. His niche magazine managed to stay afloat even with a small audience during a time of economic instability. Plus, the intensity of his audience's devotion to the genre increased.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3323-9.ch016

By 1930, fans who met through these letter pages started to communicate independently with one another, moving beyond the boundaries of the magazine. They formed local fan groups and correspondence clubs. In 1934, Gernsbeck made the fandom official by forming the Science Fiction League, which granted charters to the clubs and organized fan conventions. Although in its infancy, the science fiction fandom began to fracture immediately. On one side were the true believers, the fans who believed science fiction could inspire a new era of science and democracy. On the other, fans who just loved the stories and held no greater ambitions than to continue engaging with them (Knight, 1978; Nevela-Lee, 2016).

By 2014, countless fandoms had fully established themselves online through social media and fan-centric communities social forums. The same communication characteristics that Gernsbeck used to increase engagement in the 1920s have facilitated even stronger fanbases for nearly every entertainment genre. Fans connect directly to one another as well as have ample opportunities, both online and through conventions, to communicate with creators. Similar to their early science fiction predecessors, fractures among groups are not only frequent but have escalated well beyond the boundaries of fandom, expedited by the affordances of social media, online capabilities, and the characteristics of video games themselves.

The group dynamics of early science fiction fans followed a pattern recognizable through Social Identity Theory (Mead, 1937). As fans found each other, they formed groups based first on their shared identity – the level of passion felt for science fiction – then formed deeper bonds through other mutual characteristics. In this process, the dissimilarities between different fan groups became more distinct. Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains that as ingroups develop based on common attributes, outgroups become more distinguished by their differences. Group members begin to distinguish themselves through the traits shared with fellow members as well as by the differences they have with those not in their community (Sherif et al., 1961). These dissimilarities start to become more profound than the shared similarities as groups compete over resources. Conflict predictably ensues.

Groups with access to the most resources thrive; therefore, competition becomes inevitable (Mead, 1937; Sherif et al, 1961; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For the 1930s science fiction fans, power, naturally, was the ultimate resource. The competition among the fan clubs came to head in 1939 over organizational details for the First World Science Fiction Convention and what was dubbed by a fan club known as the Futurians, *The Great Exclusion Act* (Knight, 1978; Nevela-Lee, 2016). Competition is understood as “behavior oriented toward a goal in which other competitors’ goal is secondary,” whereas rivalry is “behavior oriented toward a human being in which worsting is the primary goal” (Mead, 1937 p. 17). The factions involved in the convention’s organization wanted the power to direct how the genre should be appreciated. When one group, the Futurians, lost their bid to be organizers, they turned competition into a rivalry. The morning the convention opened, they planned a fiery protest to distribute pamphlets written predominantly to humiliate their rivals (Knight, 1978). Their plans were quickly stopped by the event organizers at the front door, and The Futurians were banned from the event and excluded from conference proceedings. The group took this as a personal affront to their values and ideals, not as the obvious consequence for creating a public disruption (Knight, 1978; Nevela-Lee, 2016).

Now, social media has replaced the letter pages of science fiction magazines. The fan forum, established in the 20th century, has evolved to global proportions with instantaneous communication among fans as well as direct creator-consumer dialogues online and in person. Conflicts among fan groups also often escalate exponentially, reaching far beyond the primary fandoms involved and have the potential to become part of cultural conversations. The scale of fandom itself also has pushed far beyond the small, niche audiences of early science fiction. The evolution of the genre has pushed itself out from the sidelines and into mainstream culture. Many of the recent economically successful and popular media

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