**21 Role-Playing Games as Subculture and Fandom**

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This chapter examines role-playing games (RPGs) as a subculture and fan activity. We first define some of the key terms needed to understand these ideas, providing a brief overview of relevant schools of thought and linking these theories to RPGs. Then we look at how and where subcultural and fan practices take place, and discuss whether RPG communities identify themselves as a subculture – or not.

We will reflect on how the things that fans produce, and the ways they communicate with each other give examples of how RPGs have permeated gaming and popular cultures **(see also Chapter 9)**. We also discuss some of the problems inherent with this relationship; for example the relationship of fans to their object of fandom and its producers is often difficult. We suggest that fans of roleplaying games are defined by their subcultural practices – the things they create as a result of their fandom – and that the subculture itself is defined by its fans and their desires.

Furthermore, we will discuss whether the relatively mainstream position of RPGs, both in gaming and geek culture, still means that they qualify as a subculture. Unease in fan communities, seen through the toxicity of movements like #gamergate, but also in the rise of “geek chic” and aggressive “pro-gamer” products like Felicia Day’s video “I’m The One That’s Cool” (Whedon and Day 2012) suggest that gaming subculture has broadened to a point that it has destabilised. It seems that the fandom of gaming, including that of RPGs is large, and too disparate to unite within one small remit. Defining and understanding the relationship of fans / subcultures to RPGs is therefore important, even if this means that they need to be regarded in a wider context.

## Subcultures and RPGs

Sub-cultures must exhibit a distinctive enough shape and structure to make them identifiably different from their ‘parent’ culture. They must be focused around certain activities, values, certain uses of material artefacts, territorial spaces etc. which significantly differentiate them from the wider culture. But, since they are subsets, there must also be significant things that bind and articulate them with the ‘parent’ culture…. Sub-cultures, therefore, take shape around the distinctive activities and ‘focal concerns’ of groups. They can be loosely or tightly bounded. Some sub-cultures are merely loosely-defined strands or ‘milieux’ within the parent culture: they possess no distinctive ‘world’ of their own. Others develop a clear, coherent identity and structure.

(Clarke et al. 1975: 13-14)

For a subculture to exist, one must be able to cite networks of communication through which common information is transmitted. Second, one needs to show that [RPG] gamers identify themselves as a group and as sharing a subculture. Finally, the subsociety must be identified as such by those outside of the group, which increases the perception of common interests of the group members and increases solidarity

(Fine 1983: 26)

Subcultural studies began in the late 1920s, with sociologists investigating gangs as carriers of *deviance* – behaviour that deviates from recognised social norms and provokes negative reactions in response, like crime. These initial studies explained deviance as a result of gang members sharing *alternative* *norms* different from those of ‘normal’ society – a subculture (e.g. Cohen 1955). In 1979, Dick Hebdige’s *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style* shifted this to a predominantly Marxist interpretation of subcultural practices as (symbolic) resistance to the norms of mainstream culture. In 1995, Sarah Thornton’s examination of clubbing cultures extended this work, defining subcultures as distinctive and also porous, allowing members to move in and out of them more smoothly, and engaging with them in a more temporal manner. Overall, studies have tended to see subcultures as apart from the mainstream, gradually veering towards an acceptance of these groups as different rather than frightening.

Within the academic study of games, discussions of RPGs as a subculture have been a popular and lasting subject for some time. Early studies examined the tabletop RPG (TRPG) in terms of their players and history (Holmes 1981), sociality (Fine 1983), and as a performative text (Mackay 2001). These perspectives are important because they placed the early analysis of RPGs firmly within a sociological framework, focusing on the players and the contexts of play. Holmes’ book is largely descriptive, giving a broad overview of RPG gaming, it’s history and meaning in the wider cultural sphere. However Gary Fine’s *Shared Fantasy*, studies player behaviour and activities specifically. Fine firmly identifies TRPGs (then often called ‘Fantasy Role-Play Games’ (FRP)) as a subcultural practice that should be studied as such and highlights common trends within RPG subcultures such as shared ‘cant, in-jokes and common expressions’ (28). In *The Language of Gaming,* Astrid Ensslin (2012) describes such shared forms of communication as ‘buddylect’ (Ensslin 87-96). The shared observations of each text are important as they demonstrate a lasting subcultural trend over nearly thirty years of gaming communities. These typical forms of shared discourse can also be seen through acts like wearing ribbons at conventions with comments or jokes that signal to others that subcultural behaviour is being practiced. These kinds of activities are well-established and continue today.

Mackay elaborates on subcultural behaviour by discussing the role-playing game as a performative text. He understands the formation of a subculture around TRPGs predominantly through an expanded version of Goffman’s frame analysis (1974). Within this framework, he describes TRPGs as forming subcultures through the creation of games played by small groups of people (Mackay 2001: 3), and then subsequently through their performances at gaming conventions (69-73). The behaviour he observes is of players performing; for themselves, for their group, and at conventions. These groups are not deliberately isolationist subcultures and instead deliberately reach out to other RPG players beyond the remit of private spaces. These early studies helped to identify subcultural activities and practices as a key element of studies concerning RPGs.

## Fandom and RPGs

To define *fan* is a fraught activity, but generally, a fan is taken to be someone who engages within a subculture organized around a specific object of study, be it *Star Trek,* science fiction literature, Sherlock Holmes, anime, comics, gaming, or sports. Fans engage in a range of activities related to their passion: they write derivative literature called *fan fiction,* they create artworks, they write what’s known as meta (analyses of fandom itself, or analysis of analysis), they play role-playing games, they blog, they make fan vids, and they organize and attend conventions. Not least, they create and pass along a culture, with its attendant rules of behavior and acceptability.

(Helleksen 2009)

At the core of *fan studies*, a label loosely applied to scholarly work that examines fan practices and culture, lies the question of what, or rather who, is a fan. Karen Helleksen’s definition identifies three criteria; fans are fans of something, they engage in activities related to this thing, and they create and pass along a culture which lays down behavioural codes and social practices which is often informed by this thing. There are similarities with the idea of a subculture, since the fan is part of a niche group who evolve their own social practices, dress in a certain way, and formulate an exclusive discourse related to the object that they are a fan of. For many scholars, fans are identified by their tendency to produce or share content in a visible manner that demonstrates knowledge of the fannish subject and a personal identification to it. For example someone who posts on an online forum, wears a t-shirt or goes to a convention about their chosen subject. Both Marxist and consumerist readings of fan culture agree that the extensive market that surrounds and supports fans enables them to practice being a fan with relative ease.

## What are Fan Studies?

Fan studies scholars have frequently focused on science fiction and fantasy (SFF) fandom. Very early research also looked at sports fans, but, like the studies around subcultures, it often tended to regard fans in a negative light: as out of control and obsessive. Joli Jensen notes that the media often capitalises on these negative stereotypes, seeing fans as either part of a hysterical crowd, or as obsessive loners, and that this characterisation is a deliberate act of societal control; ‘Defining disorderly and emotional fan display as excessive allows the celebration of all that is orderly or unemotional’. (Jensen in Lewis 1992: 24), however this has changed, and fans are now usually studied in relation to their social interactions and outputs, rather than their perceived behaviour.

One of the most influential fan studies scholars is Henry Jenkins, with his book *Textual Poachers* (1992)*.* Jenkins uses De Certeau’s somewhat derogatory notion of ‘textual poaching’ to describe how fans take (poach) an original text and repurpose it for their own ends:

Readers are travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it for themselves

(De Certeau 1984: 174)

Henry Jenkins argues that fans can only create work retrospectively, after the core text has been finalised. Thus, fans are not always listened to by the people who produce the works of fannish attention, as they are not seen as relevant. To some extent, this means that they are exploited – by both the consumerist market that aims to make them consume fannish products, and by producers, who use fans to disseminate their own works without attribution, recognition or payment. However, fans are able to use this dynamic to their own ends via textual poaching. Jenkins argues that fandom is a method for expressing dissention, since ‘fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media’ (1992: 23).

Jenkins’ subsequent work has continued to pinpoint moments of struggle between media producers and media fans in an effort to consider points when fans have led to successful shifts in the ideologies of production, and how this has changed over time (2006a). Jenkins now sees fans as strong influencers, but they remain less powerful than their own self-perception might suggest (Jenkins 199). His writing on fans also focuses on how they produce and tell stories across media (‘transmedia’) (Jenkins 2007), and how they bring different media together to produce more all-encompassing texts (‘convergence’) (Jenkins 2006b). Jenkins’ concept of ‘transmedial storytelling’ encourages storytellers and content producers to create fannish objects in various different ways, across media and allowing fans to participate at different points and in different ways. A good example of this would be the *D&D* player who played the online game before sitting around the table for a TRPG adventure, or who played an adventure and then sought out a novel set in the same universe.

Although fans were seen as initially having very little input into the object of fandom, this relationship has changed significantly over time, especially with the advent of the internet. Helleksen and Busse (2006) see fans as ‘early adopters’ of digital technologies, as they are often separated geographically and use this technology to share information and ideas. Their work specifically examines the ways in which fans use online technology to support their outputs.

David Gauntlett, Clay Shirky, Cornel Sandvoss, and Matt Hills are some of the key scholars examining the new generation of internet users and producers. Gauntlett describes creative practices online as empowering, based around ‘co-creativity’ (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2000); citing the growth of groups with shared interests working together towards a common goal. These people bring their own expertise to bear on each project, allowing highly specialised elements of production to emerge.

In *Here Comes Everybody* Clay Shirky describes co-creative practice as liberating and revolutionary, capable of fixing social crises and bringing people together in productive, emancipating ways (2008). His examples include those of communities working together to share information and help each other, both on and offline. Sandvoss’ work is however more about fans themselves, and reaches towards definitions of how they consume and create work. He sees fan consumption as mirroring the self and creating a form of self-identity, which is also reflected in their creative practices online, but his writing is less optimistic in tone. Like Henry Jenkins, Sandvoss considers the pressures that fans are subjected to as consumers of an aggressive market.

Finally, Matt Hills examines later fandom and unpacks the ‘producer-fan’; a fan who has found themselves in the role of a content producer. He argues that as fandom has developed and changed over time, so too has it become more empowered. There are now areas in which fans have direct influence over the texts that they are attached to. Hills uses Russell T Davies; a fan who became the showrunner / executive producer for Doctor Who between 2005 - 2010 as his prime example (2010). This theory is particularly useful here since the games industry is populated by fans, of both the genre and the individual text, and because games – most specifically TRPGs, allow content creation as an integral part of their make-up. This means that the producer-fan exists on all levels of RPG content creation, from the *D&D* player crafting their own adventures, to writers and designers working on big budget computer RPG games. This type of activity is also often known as ‘co-creativity’ – a process by which fans work alongside developers to produce content.

## Fan Practices

There is a great deal of overlap between the theories and work examining subcultures and fan studies. This includes some of the critical terms and concepts used, as well as studies that assume fans exist within their own subculture. This chapter therefore accepts the following premises:

* RPG fandom is a subculture.
* Within the subculture of RPG fans, there are specific subcultures and fandoms.
* Fandoms and Subcultures are often seen as interchangeable.

Specific work on RPG fans tends to blur with their examination as subcultures: role-players are seen as both fans of the genre (role-playing), and part of a role-playing subculture which embraces co-creative activity online. This work is often ‘autoethnographic’, as the researchers embed themselves within the fan community and study it from within.

***Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research where the author uses a self-reflective form of writing to explore and describe their own experience while connecting it to some broader context. It is also used to refer to studies where the author provides insight into a culture they belong to.***

Callout 21.1: Authoethnography

MORPGs in particular provided a useful subject, since they actively encouraged the formation of communities of play. At the same time, the sheer growth in players participating in online games meant that RPGs became an extremely visible aspect of broader videogaming culture. Key texts here examine the role of the player within subcultural groups, and the meaning of gameplay for these people. T.L Taylor’s *Play Between Worlds* (2006) presents gamers as creators both on and offline, following their fannish activities and social behaviours through an examination of a guild of *Everquest* gamers. Celia Pearce identifies ways in which to study players through an autoethnographic lens, again tracing the behaviour of a group of players in the online puzzle RPG *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*, and the subsequent migration of the players to other platforms, where they subsequently recreated the game (2009). These books set the tone for future writing about players’ fannish practices as an important part of community building. Both authors ultimately collaborated on *Ethnography of Virtual Worlds*, which seeks to provide a taxonomy on how to study players and fans within virtual spaces (Boellstorff et al. 2012).

[**Box Insert 21.1 near here**]

Games like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004 - present) attract millions of players, leading to smaller, niche subcultures forming within them. Thus, we have also seen growth and interest in more specific areas of player practices. For example, Ashley ML Brown’s *Sexuality in Roleplaying Games* (2015) studies a group of *WoW* players writing fan fiction to each other; creating roleplaying opportunities within a MORPG that seems to have strayed from the imaginative, individual element of roleplaying **(see Chapter 25)**. Similarly, Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros chart the rise of Nordic Larp through a variety of means, including archival photography taken by players at events (2010), and discuss elements such as the broad nature of RPG scenarios that these groups explore. Elsewhere, edited collections such as *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy* (Robichaud, ed. 2014), *Digital Culture, Play and Identity* (Rettburg-Walker and Cornelliusen, eds. 2011) and *The Roleplaying Society* (ed. Byers and Crocco 2016), examine fannish output or subcultural practices within the remit of a specific text, again seeming these groups as fans or subcultures within the broader church of the ‘RPG’ genre.

Elsewhere, the dialogue begun by earlier scholars about the influence of fans over the fannish text is unpacked by authors such as Patrick Prax (2016) and Nichol Lamerichs (2011), who sound a note of caution against assuming entirely altruistic relations between companies and their fans. Within RPGs and MORPGs, it is common for players to make ‘mods’ (‘modifications’), ‘machinima’ (videos which use footage from the games) or to otherwise broadcast the game in other transmedial places. Prax argues that the use of mods in particular can be exploitative, with companies appropriating elements developed by fans that improve a game, but often simply taking these without accreditation. Similarly, Lamerichs argues that the time and effort taken to create a cosplay (costumed play) of an RPG character helps promote that game, with little thanks or reciprocality from the gaming companies (2015).

# Framing RPG subcultures, fans and fandom

Gamers and RPG fans are becoming increasingly obvious within the wider sphere of popular culture. Frans Mäyrä (2008) argues that the organisation of players into subcultures is a useful way to understand their social and cultural manifestations in a broader context. As the hobby has grown and become more mainstream, so too have opportunities for these groups to reach out to each other and create opportunities to publicly share their fandom. Social events, meet-ups and conventions have allowed the spread of roleplaying throughout geek culture, and enabled their dissemination beyond this to a wider audience. In this respect, RPG subcultures can be seen as reaching out, both to each other, and to new audiences. The growth of ‘outward show’ within RPG cultures; initially observed by Mackay (1983), is now a fundamental aspect of RPG fandom and activity. As an example, the growth in attendance at gaming conventions such as GenCon (USA) and the UK Games EXPO shows the willingness of RPG players to express moments of fandom within a public sphere (Law 2016). Similarly, the spread of geek fashion and merchandise, which has grown to support this audience, has a reciprocal effect as it pushes roleplaying games more visibly into mainstream culture. Supporting this is Matt Hills’ argument that fandom is always performative– that in order to be a fan, a person must be acting out their desires in a visible manner (Hills 2002). The idea of performativity in fans lends itself strongly to RPGs, since they are often played collaboratively, with players acting out their roles in some form.

**[Box Insert 21.2 Near Here]**

Because fandom and subculture are often used interchangeably as theoretical terms, gaming scholars have tried to frame gaming fans more specifically. Partly, this is an attempt to clarify how videogame subcultures and fandoms act or exist in specific ways. For example there is a perception of greater performativity of RPG fans – e.g. creating machinima or Let’s Play videos in which they roleplay their characters from RPGs. Scholars are curious to understand this interest in performance and roleplaying within games that already provide them with strong narratives.

***Gaming capital is a way to capture the idea that belonging to game culture requires more than just playing games. More broadly it’s about acquiring, creating and sharing knowledge about games (Consalvo 2009)***

Callout 22.2: Gaming Capital

Mia Consalvo uses the term ‘gaming capital’ instead of ‘subculture’ when discussing videogamers and gaming fans, borrowing from Bourdieu’s idea of cultural production (2009 3-4). Gaming capital is a way of defining how fans make meaning when ‘doing culture’ (or, acting as part of a subculture). Consalvo argues that this term helps to contextualise what RPG groups are doing, and avoids some of the assumptions about ‘subcultures’ having a physical aspect, since gaming fans may never come together fully. Instead, they often exist in geographically disparate locations. However, they enact their fandom via a complex infrastructure of newsletters, message boards, review sites, and hobby magazines, which pull the community together. Even though gamers may not know each other, they are likely subscribers to the same magazines, and lurk on common message boards. Patrick Kinkade and Michael Katovich (2009) also report on this phenomenon in their ethnography of *Magic: The Gathering* players. But, they term it ‘ethereal culture’, a nod to the ways in which these cultural attitudes are often indebted to an invisible cultural network which may not ever meet physically.

# Outcomes and Outputs

Fans demonstrate their attachment in a tangible manner. As a result, fans are usually visible because they form subcultures to outwardly express their fandom. This can take the form of elements such as cosplay, sculpture, art, music and fashion. Fandom has an established ‘early adopter’ relationship with the media and uses it extensively as a mode of communication and demonstration (Coppa in Hellekson and Busse 2006: 41-61).

RPGs specifically encourage imaginative and performative practices individual to the RPG player. The website DeviantArt hosts millions of images of roleplaying art and costumes, whilst the fanfiction site *Archive of Our Own* lists 900 *Dungeons & Dragons* stories alone (2016). In addition to websites and forums that review and discuss new titles amongst their members, there is a growing number of sites which showcase RPG culture specifically. Straightforward pod and webcasts such as *Dungeon Crawlers Radio* and *The Dice Tower* (Vasel et al. 2005 – present) review new titles. YouTuber Mo Mo O’Brien produces ‘how to’ content for various different aspects of the hobby. Players recruit new members and discuss roleplaying on forums such as Reddit. There is also a growing audience for spectating roleplaying games online, especially if the participants are celebrities. YouTubers Geek and Sundry and The Yogscast have featured playthroughs of *Fiasco*, *Dragon Age*, the latest *Star Wars RPG* and *D&D*. A more transmedial version of this can be seen in the podcast *Welcome to Nightvale* (Fink and Craynor: 2012 - present) and blogger / artist Richard Littler’s eerie website and book *Discovering Scafolk* (Littler: 2014), both of which use common tropes from supernatural roleplaying games. The producers often assume that the audience will have some familiarity with RPG tropes in order to understand the humor or intertextual references in their shows and programs.

# Fan Production and Co-Creativity

When creating a combat encounter, let your imagination run wild and build something your players will enjoy. Once you have the details figured out, use this section to adjust the difficulty of the encounter.

(Mearls and Crawford 2015: 56)

The dialogical relationship that fan production has with the RPG genre is not only well established, but an intrinsic part of the usage of roleplaying games. *Dungeons & Dragons* grew as part of a rich tradition of fan correspondence around the game. Fans would write letters to each other discussing their thoughts on the game, proposing ideas for new rules and additions, and also recounting their experiences playing the game **(see also Chapters 10 and 20)**.

RPG gaming capital (Consalvo 2009) is creative by nature – playing a TRPG or larp involves a ‘shared fantasy’ (Fine 1983) that must be collectively experienced and created by the players. Rulebooks are ‘incomplete’ to run adventures, they require creativity, and many modules entail explicit guidance how to create your own adventures, or seeds for adventures. Players and GMs must co-create the universe, story and experience of a TRPG.

**[Insert Box Insert 21.3 around here]**

Whilst modules and campaign settings may set the tone for games, there is an assumption that players will also design their own games, characters and stories – TRPGs are specifically designed with this in mind, for example – whereby rule and source books provide building block style information designed to be used by players as part of a creative practice, and it is common that large scale larps in the UK are written by a team of players that changes over time. ‘Spin-off’ or ‘froth’ events written by other players are also common. For many RPG games, the assumption that players will create their own versions or work creatively to expand the rules or artefacts within a game is often written into the ethos of each game. In fact, worldbuilding, or the process of creating an imaginary world, has become so endemic that for some RPGs worldbuilding *is* the gameplay e.g *Microscope* (Robbins 2011) or *Aria: Canticle of the Monomyth* (Moore & Seyler 1994) (see also Chapter 20).

Fan creation has also traditionally been supported by the publishers of TRPGs. For example, in 2000 Wizards of the Coast created the Open Game License (OGL) that allows commercial and non-commercial publishers to release modifications or supplements to the *D&D* system without paying for the use of the system's associated intellectual property (with some caveats). This arrangement presupposes that players will create their own games, and the more games created, the more the loyalty to the key texts grows, as these still have to be purchased in order to play.

There is a similar practice in the case of digital RPGs with standalone tools such as *RPGMaker* (1992-present) that allows for the creation of CRPG titles. It is also common for CRPGs to allow players to “mod” or create their own content for them. *Neverwinter Nights* (BioWare 2002), for example, included the Aurora toolkit that allowed players to build their own games using the game’s engine and assets. *Skywind*, and *SkyBlivion* are fan made projects remaking previous *Elder Scrolls* titles, within the *Skyrim* world (*TESRenewal Project*: 2016).

Various aspects of the RPG industry benefit from fan input, or are designed with it in mind. In MORPGs, players have hacked the code to provide modifications and apps, which then become integrated as standard parts of gameplay. Patrick Prax discusses the relationship between mods and *World of Warcraft*, noting that a significant number of player-made tools (such as the Mod ‘Quest Helper’) are now default aspects of *WoW*’s user interface (Prax 2012). Elsewhere, players interact with the gameworld in order to change it. In Egyptian technology building MORPG *A Tale in the Desert* (eGenesis 2003 - present), players can suggest rules which are put to a collective vote and which change the code of the game. The *Everquest* spin off *Landmark* (Daybreak Game Company 2016) also allowed players to build their own structures, whilst borrowing its worldsphere – the atmosphere created in an MORPG by players and developers working collectively to worldbuild their environment in an ongoing manner (2003) – from the earlier *Everquest* games.

As with much of geek culture, roleplaying games are widely disseminated online, across a range of dedicated and more general geek culture sites. One environment where the relationship between fans and creators has developed is on crowdfunding sites such as *Kickstarter* and *IndieGoGo*. These sites regularly feature new or revised games, which are brought to the market through financial pledges by consumers. If the game does not raise enough money, it cannot be published, whilst the quality and variety of the game is often contingent on the amount raised. This type of funding model is indicative of the more consumerist relationship between fan/subculture and producers, but also of how the RPG industry uses fans to determine interest and value for older and future products **(see Chapter 16)**.

## Big Name Fans and Celebritization

Matt Hills’ work on fandom identifies what he calls ‘BNFs’ – Big Name Fans. These are fans who have become embedded in the industry as a result of their fandom (Hills 2010). These fans have a deep-set knowledge of the industry, and often specifically enter it in order to continue to immerse themselves as agents of gaming capital – creating the very thing that they are a fan of. They are also seen as key influencers, in turn producing their own works for fans with increased expertise and potentially an awareness of ‘fan service’ (listening to what fans want and ‘serving’ them with these desires). This second tier of fans appreciate that BNFs are not only fans in their own right, but that their work comes specifically from their knowledge of such. For example, Monica Valentinelli is a TRPG writer for various franchises with a history of strong fandoms, including *Firefly* (Whedon 2002) and *Vampire The Masquerade* (2015, 2016, 2017), and her writing is born specifically from her in depth knowledge of each text.

BNFs are an important part of RPG fan culture for a number of reasons. Most of the early proponents of the genre were fans and amateur developers or writers first, and grew the industry because of their own fannish desires (see Chapter 9). RPGs and CRPGs demand fan involvement and sharing, and with the rise of online video sharing (e.g. Youtube) and live streaming of gameplay (e.g. Twitch), they are also easy to consume by spectators. Finally, good writers, artists, cosplayers and other RPG creatives are shared transmedially – and experts are celebrated as such. Thus, the industry has always been in part shaped by fans, and fans are expected to be key influencers within it. The worldbuilding of any given RPG is often highly detailed, may be driven by complex, nuanced rule systems, and may have been in existence for a number of years. In-depth knowledge is important to the continued development of these products, and therefore fans, especially ones that others respect and who demonstrate expertise are useful.

Some BNFs have become well-known through a combination of luck, through appropriation of a popular transmedia channel, or by filling a niche market. Most notably this has happened through YouTube, as the platform allows non-industry members and fans to upload content freely to their own channels, and because the visual nature of the platform allows content producers to ‘show’, as well as ‘tell’. For example, *Shut Up and Sit Down* (Dean and Smith 2013 - present) and *The Dice Tower* (Vassel et al. 2005 – present) review RPG games, *High Rollers,* and *Harmon Town* (Harmon and Davis 2011 –present) serialise TRPG campaigns, and Lindsay Stirling and Megan Lara produce fan related music and artwork.

**[Box Insert 21.4 around here]**

However, the relationship between fans, BNFs and the industry can get complicated. A growing number of geek celebrities use their fandom commercially. YaYa Han is a popular cosplayer who now also sells clothing and makes ‘how to’ videos, influencing future cosplayers who imitate her style as well as that of the RPG character costumes she creates (Han 2017). Fans who follow BNFs tend to respect them for their authenticity, and therefore regard their reviews or the products that they consume in a positive light. Sponsorship deals are also problematic, as fans have specific ideas regarding the authenticity of a BNF. A group seen to be taking sponsorship can be heavily criticised for doing so, accused of ‘selling out’ or somehow losing their status as fans and instead becoming complicit with market forces. Overall, however, it is unclear how much power fans and BNFs have. Henry Jenkins’ early discussions of fandom see it as ultimately powerless (Jenkins 2002), but partly thanks to greater fan visibility, this has changed dramatically.

# Subculture no More?

The cultural impact of games like *Dungeons & Dragons* permeates popular discourse far beyond gaming **(see also Chapter 9)**. MORPGs and CRPGs comprise a significant part of the videogame industry, and the rise of social events for RPG players, as well as their intertextual relationships with other media, has given RPG fandoms and subcultures a high degree of prominence in videogaming culture and beyond. Some elements of RPGs have become so well known in popular culture that they have, as Clarke et al. discuss, bound themselves to the ‘parent culture’, becoming so familiar and accepted that they are often seen as mainstream, rather than subcultures or niche activities. For example, MORPGs like *World of Warcraft* and *Runescape* (Jagex 2001-present) have dominated the MORPG market and provided formative gaming experiences for millions of people. RPG tropes like experience points are ubiquitous beyond RPGs. Thousands of people attend gaming events every year, and ludic aspects of games have translated across platforms in a highly pervasive manner (see Chapter 9). There is a clear argument here that sees RPGs as a part of gaming culture as a whole, and therefore relinquishing their position as a specific subculture within it.

# Summary

RPG fan and subcultures have become so well known that they are arguably no longer subcultures: they are part of popular culture. RPGs are culturally well known, with big recognisable franchises such as *Final Fantasy*, *D&D* and *WoW* whose products and symbols can be appreciated by people who may not identify strongly with them. Science fiction and fantasy – in many ways the cultural foundations from which RPGs emerged – have become mainstream. Consider the success of franchises like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Jackson 2001-3) or *Harry Potter* (Rowling 1997-2007). Whilst fandom can be seen as performative, the tenets that have previously denoted RPG cultural production as subcultural have largely disintegrated, and barriers to entry have been removed. A more visible profile, through public events, dissemination over the internet and an increase in / demand for such products has led to these fandoms and subcultures becoming homogenized and commonplace. Yet RPGs are still distinct in terms of form. It will be interesting to see whether RPG cultures and fandoms are simply riding a wave of popularity, or if their current status is permanent.

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**Box Insert 21.1**

In 2012 freelance journalist Lizzie Stark published “Leaving Mundania”. In it, she details her experience diving into the world of LARPs. She examines both the history of the hobby as well as the diversity of its fandom and uses today. Although she isn’t quite aware of this as she writes it, the book is an interesting perspective on becoming a fan. Although by the end of her narrative it is clear Stark is both impressed and amazed by what she’s learned about larping, she still maintains a certain degree of professional distance from the hobby. This would quickly change. Lizzie Stark is by now a well-known and respected member of the North American and international larping communities. Not only has she published more books on the subject (e.g. “Pocket Guide to American Freeform”, 2014) but she is now a larp designer, or larpwright, and helps run conventions and workshops. Her story seems to run counter to the common narrative of the fan who is able to become a professional in their hobby – as a designer, or publisher. Lizzie became a fan after immersing herself in larp for the book she was writing. The book came first, the fan came second.

**Box Insert 21.2**

In the TRPG world, GenCon and Origins Game Fair are probably the most well-known conventions. GenCon was founded in 1968 by Gary Gygax as a wargames convention. Once Gygax had co-created *D&D*, the emphasis quickly shifted towards TRPGs. Nowadays GenCon is held in Indianapolis, USA and features all sorts of RPGs as well as other kinds of games. Origins Game Fair is run by the Game Manufacturer’s Association (GAMA), a trade organization dedicated to non-electronic games including TRPGs and LARPS. It is held annually in Columbus, Ohio (USA) and features the Origins Awards ceremony, which features several categories for TRPGs and larps.

Other notable RPG conventions and gatherings of note:

**BlizzCon –** Organized by Blizzard Entertainment for fans of its games including World of Warcraft and the Diablo series. Held in Anaheim, California.

**Gaelcon -** A national gaming convention run in Dublin, Ireland, with an emphasis on RPG tournaments and sessions as well as larps and wargame RPGs.

**Intercon** – Refers to a series of larp conventions usually held in the north-east USA. The largest is Intercon O usually held in the Boston area.

**Knutepunkt** (aka Knutpunkt, Knudepunkt, Solmukohta) – Began as a larp conference, but is now broader. Moves around between Nordic countries.

**Ropecon** – Finnish RPG convention, features TRPGs, LARPS and other non-digital games.

**UK Games Expo** - Includes boardgames and TRPGs as well as other games. Notably includes free open areas for people to play games.

**Wyrd Con** – LARP convention held in the US west coast since 2010.

**Box Insert 21.3**

Fan co-creativity and transformative works are wrapped in struggles around their “moral economy” (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013; Banks & Deuze, 2009): the unwritten social norms and expectations surrounding the written laws of economic exchanges – in the case of creative works like RPGs, intellectual property (IP) and authorship are the most common. Fans find that their deep investment in and contributions to a game earn them certain moral rights to have a say in its development and use it in their own creative expression. So, fan creativity follows logics of gift exchange and social recognition, and not contracts and financial pay. Companies in turn often enforce IP law to retain control over a games’ creative direction and eliminate fan works perceived as competing or ‘brand-damaging’. On the other hand, companies are happy to capitalise on significant free labor by fans modding, extending, improving, translating, or advocating for a game without formal recognition let alone payment. An early example in RPGs was the controversy surrounding the creation of the “Thief” class in the original D&D. Its co-creator Gary Gygax wrote the rules for this new class after a telephone conversation with a player from California that later led to complaints of ideas being stolen (Peterson, 2012, 469-471). It did not help that there was no acknowledgement or attribution when the rules were later published by TSR. Accessible tools for creation and digital distribution have intensified these struggles since awareness of fan work can both grow and spread quickly, and fans are able to more easily, and collectively, voice their concerns.

**Box Insert 21.4**

Although we are arguing in this chapter that RPG culture is a significant part of broader popular culture such that it may not make sense to refer to it as a subculture, the truth is that even within RPG culture, not all forms are treated or viewed equally. There are multiple versions of a “Geek Hierarchy” that can be found online that purport to describe, sometimes for humorous purposes but in others more discriminatory, the relationship between different subcommunities. In these hierarchies, it is often the case that “videogamers” are portrayed as less geeky than tabletop roleplayers. Live action roleplayers are often represented as the geekiest. In this context “geek” is generally used to refer to the degree of acceptance within mainstream popular culture – thus to be “geekier” is to be less mainstream. Arguably RPG fans also often make similar distinctions even within form: *D&D* and *Pathfinder* players might be seen as more mainstream than fans of more obscure TRPGs while freeform LARPers might see themselves as more niche than, say, action-based boffer LARP players. In the case of CRPGs, a common distinction is made between fans of games traditionally made in Japan (JRPGs) and those made in the US or UK, and MORPG fan cultures are quite different when comparing games played predominantly in, say, Korea, China, or the US.