

# The divergence of sport and sci-fi fandom

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March 10, 2006

AME 598

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As humans, we spend most of our lives looking for things that we enjoy. When we do find a particular niche of interest, we tend to infuse it into our lives, letting it consume our time, memory, and money. In other words, we become a fan. This concept is not new or undocumented. Many scholars have studied the implications of fandom and how our society reacts and influences these subculture niches. All are aware of the stigmatized stereotypes associated with particular fan groups, but it seems as though the variances of these stereotypes between fan groups are not well understood.

In this paper, I would like to touch on fan stereotypes and their acceptance into society. Specifically, I want to dissect the sports fan and the sci-fi fan to determine why society has such double standards for these groups. Observing the genres of sci-fi and sports offers a look at the innate differences between fans, but stark similarities that make these groups appear to be more alike than society may admit.

When changing the focus of fandom from sports and celebrities to academic disciplines and opera buffs, it is clear that some aspects of affection are socially accepted while others are looked down upon. Both sci-fi and sports fans are generally negatively gazed upon by society at large as being space-head nerds or unintelligent hooligans. Some view this fandom as pathological deviance. Dr. Joli Jensen, of the University of Tulsa, states “Fandom is seen as a psychological symptom of a presumed social dysfunction” (Jensen 1992). But it is difficult to fully agree when “in many ways we are all ‘fans’” in some respect or another (Lewis 1992). Does personal investment in a form of popular media stem from a dysfunction? Jensen clearly states how a fan is reflected in society:

Were I to call myself a fan, I would imply that I am emotionally engaged with unworthy cultural figures and forms, and that I was risking obsession, with dangerous consequences. I would imply that I was a psychologically incomplete person, trying to

compensate for my inadequate life through the reflected glory of these figures and forms, My unstable and fragile identify needs them, they are a 'therapeutic crutch,' a form of 'para-social relations,' functioning as 'personas' in my life. I must have these relationships because my lonely, marginal existence requires that I prop myself up with these fantasy attachments to famous dead people, and these alliances with abstract, imaginary communities (Jensen 1992).

It is obvious that an outsider's perspective of a fan group is inherently negative, whether focusing on sport or sci-fi. In this respect, both sci-fi and sports fans share a general stigmatism from those that do not affiliate themselves to these groups. Although they share the same "fandom qualities," their level of social acceptance is disproportionate.

I will address the issues of fandom by isolating two specific fan groups: Star Trek fans and Dallas Cowboy fans, and assess the various cultural, personal, and societal implications of being a member of these groups. These particular groups were chosen because of their large fan bases and sometimes "excessive" behaviors and loyalties. The Dallas Cowboys National Football League team has been a long-running prestigious dynasty for over 40 years. They are known to be the most successful team in the history of NFL and fans have nicknamed them "America's Team." Dallas fans can be found around the country highly supporting their team. Star Trek has the greatest fan backing of any television show ever. With 726 episodes in six series along with ten films, and various books, games, and fan media, Star Trek is one of the most well known and successful entertainment franchises in history (Wikipedia, "Star Trek", 2006). Star Trek fans are known to hold conventions and club meetings to discuss the show, characters, and owned memorabilia.

However, the social acceptance of the two groups differs. Star Trek fans, also known as "Trekkies" or "Trekkers" are not as well accepted in mainstream society as sports fans can be. As the comedian at the end of the movie *Trekkies* jokes, sports fans

can wear their jerseys any day of the week, but a Trekkie couldn't go out into public in a starship commander uniform without "getting a beating" (Nygard 1999) . Why does this hierarchy of fandom exist? I will examine the differences, though sometimes subtle, between the two groups and also their similar actions. I will attempt to determine why society views these groups differently and if a valid reason exists for the varied stigmatizations.

First, I will discuss these two groups in terms of what makes them fans: what they adore and how they show their adoration. Then I will examine how these tendencies are associated with the stereotypes given by society.

### **Object of Affection**

The object of affection of sport fans compared to sci-fi fans may be where the two most greatly divide. A Trekkie obsesses over a character (and many times the actor for whom they portray). Since this personality is not of a true nature, it is easily manipulated from various perspectives depending on what the fan wants. This is where the realm of fan media has grown substantially throughout the Trekkie subculture. The sports fan does not have the same imaginative leeway. Their affinities are attached to a real person or group of people. Most Cowboys fans, as with football fans in general, follow a team rather than specific players. With perpetual trading and player swapping, teams are always evolving, which makes it difficult to keep up for an average fan. However, there are those extreme fans that do know the names of every player on the roster and critique the trade choices of the team managers and owners. Fantasy football leagues have also grown tremendously over the years. Here, a fan can create his or her own team using the

top players of the NFL and compete against others based on how well the actual player did in his real football game that week. Although these leagues do not have any effect on the outcome of the real football game, it gives the fan the chance to feel like a team coordinator and be part of the game. This is part of the participatory nature of the sports fan. As Fiske points out “[television] fans often feel that they could write better storylines than the scriptwriters and know the characters better (Fiske 1987) and sports fans are frequently at odds with the owner’s policies for their teams”(Fiske 1992). Both groups look to go further than the realm of spectator in attempts to influence and aid their object of affection.

Although the football fan is generally connected to the broad scope of the game, their team, and its rivals, star players are created and admired. Every Cowboy fan knows of Emmitt Smith and Troy Aikman. Many fans spend the money to get the star player’s jersey. It shows an investment and knowledge in the game. But with injuries and trades, the future is always speculative for the sports fan; there is never a sure thing. But Trekkies know the path of their characters. If a fan does not like the path, an alternative one is usually created by the fan themselves and shared among the group. Writing a fantasy career of a sports player is nearly unheard of.

Another difference is that the actors that play these characters on Star Trek are usually more easily attainable than sports stars. Personal communication with an actor or seeing them speak at a Star Trek convention is not uncommon. Being able to meet your favorite sports star though, is not an easy task. Although it may be but a ticket purchase to see the Cowboys play on the field, seeing the real athlete behind the uniform is usually restricted to television appearances and press conferences. The role is flopped in the case

of the Trekkie. Whereas seeing a Star Trek actor at work may be a challenge, their Hollywood stardom is not unreachable to the ordinary public and most are willing to be contacted by their fans. The cast of Star Trek is a finite hand full of B-level actors, but the number of athletes who have played on the Dallas Cowboys is a constantly rising number of millionaires.

### *Showing Adoration*

There are distinctive differences between the actions of Cowboys fans and Trekkies when showing their affections. Stereotypically, Cowboys fans yell at the action of the athletes during a big play, whether it be at the sports venue, a bar, or on their living room couch. Celebration between fans with high fives is a common gesture, even amongst strangers. Enemies also quickly created when supporters from the other team join in spectating. Team colors are almost always wore to the support the team during the game; for some fans this means a t-shirt, for others a painted face. Superstition is also widely observed. Fans will perform gestures, wear particular clothing, or say specific commands to *help* their team to win. Sports fans will go to great lengths to become part of the game and the fan community. When it's not game time, fans will still show their loyalties by wearing a team jersey or hat. Avid fans read up on statistics and sport magazines to get the "inside scoop" behind the latest news.

Trekkies, although their adoration is no less, express their fandom differently. A fan may break out in the middle of an episode yelling at a character to stop what they are doing, but generally, the audience is a less aggressive one. It is common for a group of fan to watch the together; much like a group of Dallas fans would watch the Cowboys. But most Trekkies object to any talking during the episode so as not to miss a single line.

It is also common for both groups to discuss the episode/game afterward or at a later time. As Jenkins writes, “These activities provide the fan with the information needed to participate fully in the critical debates of the fan community; a missed episode means a loss of information shared by others, making it harder to participate in discussions of the program and weakening their mastery over the series” (Jenkins 1992b). Where sports fans generally dwell on statistics, sci-fi fans are more apt to remembering character lines or episode titles. This knowledge displays the dedication of a fan and shows others how serious a fan is about their adoration.

Trekkies are also known for attending conferences. Somewhat like “the big game,” these conferences are a chance for fans from various places to converge and show their admiration as a public event. However, there are important differences between sci-fi conferences and sporting events. Most conference are organized and produced by avid fans themselves. It is a place for fans to meet each other, trade memorabilia, and become part of a large community of similar interests. A sporting event is staged by corporate media and has less focus on the fans themselves, but on the competition on the field. At a Cowboys game, every fan wearing white and blue will feel camaraderie towards each other and be comforted by the unity of the Cowboy community, but the players on the field get the attention, not the fans that share the event.

Collecting paraphernalia is also a popular way to show admiration for both groups. Many fans decorate their house with collectibles and are proud of their assortment of “things.” These collections can cost fans a great deal of money, but most find it “worth it” as long as they attain their possessions. As an extreme, one English

man went bankrupt after spending almost \$71,000 trying to turn his home into the Starship Voyager (BBC News, 2006; The Sydney Morning Herald, 2006).

### *Denying Adoration*

Although many fans vow to be followers to the end, some social situations make it difficult to show true fan colors. Also, it can sometimes be a challenge for a fan to explain to an outsider their adoration. Jenkins writes:

*Star Trek* fans often find themselves arguing from a position of weakness in attempting to defend their fascination with the program. For many, the only legitimate defense is to assert the “normality” of their lifestyle, professing their general conformity to middle-class culture as a way of creating common ground with nonfan friends (Jenkins 1992a).

A similar defense is to create legitimate reasoning of why the show has reputable aspects. For example, a Star Trek fan might admit to watching the show because of its moral values, idealistic mankind interactions, or adherence to scientific reality.

Cowboy fans however, usually defend their territory by stating that they are from the area, their family is Cowboys fans, or that they’ve just always been a fan. Sports fans can be skeptical of each other, as it is easy to jump on and off the “bandwagon” depending on how well the team is doing. Although there will always be diehard fans, sports fans are more fickle and tend to not want to be associated with a team that loses. Many halfhearted fans choose to like a team for an “illegitimate” reason in the eyes of true fan, such as liking the team colors or uniforms. However, fans like these lose respect in the subculture because their interests in the team are not real, but more of yearning to be associated with current popular culture.

## Acceptance by Society

Earlier I discussed how fans are negatively viewed by society. Fans are thought of as passive audiences crazed over unimportant media. However, as shown, the participatory culture of fandom is far from passive and fans are consumed in media that influences their daily lives. Jenkins suggests that, “The fans may just be “sitting there’ watching television but they are so emotionally engaged by the on-screen action that they seem oblivious to other household activities and actively ignore other family members’ demands for their attention” (Jenkins 1992b). This can be said for both sci-fi and sports fans. So why is it that proclaiming an alliance to a sports team by wearing logos and jerseys is acceptable in today’s culture, but dressing in a starship commander uniform is inappropriate unless heading to a sci-fi conference? Why must Sci-fi fans feed their fascination using underground fanzines and websites, where as sports fans can interact casually on the streets?

Men.

After long hours of contemplation, the only true difference between these two groups and more generally, between any popularly embraced and negatively shunned fan group, is its influence over the masculinity of society. As brought up by Fiske, “Fandom is typically associated with cultural forms that the dominant value system denigrates – pop music, romance novels, comics, Hollywood mass-appeal stars (sport, probably because of its appeal to masculinity, is an exception)” (Fiske, 1992). The male-dominated nature of society has created a safe haven for the sports fan to profess their adoration without all of the negative consequences associated with fandom. Liking a dominant sports team gives a male credibility with their peers and an acceptable excuse

to act more violent, or “manly” than usual. To further its masculinity, sports is associated with drinking beer and watching cheerleaders, which have no inherent, necessary link to sport, but games rarely seen without these features.

For exactly the opposite reason, Trekkies have been shunned by the public eye. Trekkies “are feminized and/or desexualized through their intimate engagement with mass culture” states Jenkins (1992a). Star Trek’s appeal to both men and women makes the male-dominated society uneasy about the subculture. Although the show cast is male dominated, women do play a vital role, both in the character plot and in the fan community. You can go to any fan website and see that female Trekkies make up the majority of fan fiction writers and readers. They have a richly developed devoted community that truly exhibits their adoration.

Conversely, the female sports fan had little, if any, respect in the eyes of the sporting community and have been largely marginalized in their participation both on the field and off (Crawford, 2004). Sport lecturer Garry Crawford writes:

Female fans of association football have often been labeled as ‘uncommitted’ in their support, most often by male supporters ... Though top-flight men’s hockey in the UK regularly attracts female fans in almost equal proportions to men, these fans are still often deemed as ‘inauthentic’ by other (most often male) fans, who frequently suggest that these women are only attending hockey to ‘lust’ after the players. Sport has traditionally been seen as a male domain and men ‘create barricades to “protect” their territory’ from invasion by women (Crawford, 2004).

But even those women that have shown their adequacies in sport knowledge and fandom are then cast off as masculine or lesbian by their male peers. Although some sports can be viewed as non-gendered, these generally do not have the respect and large fan bases as the male-dominant sports. There is no room for the true woman fan in the sport subculture; this grants the fan group acceptance in the male-dominated society at large. The controversy of the female sports fan (especially football) is not only men against

women, but a fight amongst the female gender as well. While many women are proud to be nudging their way into the patriarchal realm of football, feminists see the sport as “the glorification of masculinity, and the culture associated with it is constantly objectifying women” (Manville 2006). Many think that women should be fighting against this subculture, not try to become a part of it.

Instead of fighting, many women Trekkies show their adoration through writing and art. A popular fan fiction genre takes the male characters of the show (mainly Captain Kirk and Spock) and puts them in homoerotic story plots or artistic drawings commonly known as “slash.” This fan fiction was created not to demasculinize the male characters but to shift “our conception of male heroes, since a fairly rigidly defined and hierarchical conception of gender remains central to all aspects of contemporary social and cultural experience” (Jenkins 1992c). These scenarios “[put] them in cultures that are not homophobic or in which ‘sexual orientation’ itself may be a meaningless concept” (Green 1998). This type of culture has sparse recognition in society as a whole. Allowing women to have some control over the emotions of the male characters is a great threat to the patriarchal controlled society.

What does that mean for male Trekkies? From the perspective of this male-dominated society, it is unmasculine to be associated with a subculture that can appeal equally to both genders. Therefore male Trekkies need to either deny some aspects of their masculinity (stereotypical nerd), not admit to being a huge fan to their nonfan male peers, or have stereotypical masculine tendencies that overtrump the Star Trek fandom (i.e, large muscles). What about men who are both Cowboy hooligans and Star Trek nerds? Of course they are out there; it is not uncommon for people enjoy a variety of

mass media subcultures. In this case, the fan most likely acts differently according to the group that he wants to associate with. But this paper focused most on the extreme aspects of fandom, and in that case, these two groups tend to dissociate with each other.

Although I give a reason (blaming men) for the differing societal stereotypes of fan groups, I try to remain objective about this assessment. Until an unpatriarchal society is developed, I find it difficult to truly assess, or fundamentally disprove this theory. Either way, fan cultures are considered the extremes of societal interests; they act as a foundation to construct cultural normalcy and standard deviation. We must all remember that fans create the subcultures that make society what it is. The diverse attitudes, preferences, and obsessions of each individual make a fan of everyone one of us.

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