



Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and  
Fantasy Research  
journal.finfar.org

Report for Fafnir: “The rise of the nerd/geek culture – the sixth national conference of fandom studies” (“Nörttikulttuurin nousu – Kuudes valtakunnallinen fandom-tutkimuksen konferenssi”) 3.–4 March 2016, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

*Sanna Lehtonen*

Finnish fandom studies reached a new milestone in March when the sixth national fandom studies conference was organized at the University of Jyväskylä – the same location where the inaugural conference took place in 2006. This year’s event was convened by the Department of Art and Culture Studies under the theme of “The rise of the nerd/geek culture”. The theme was very timely: as one of the organisers, Katja Kontturi noted in her opening speech, the cultural understanding of a “nerd identity” has changed. Although dictionaries still label the Finnish term *nörtti* as pejorative and associate it with computer technology, the term has been appropriated by fannish and geeky groups and individuals in a positive sense (I have thus translated *nörtti* as both “nerd” and “geek”). Nerds and fans are also appreciated by the mainstream media: as Kontturi mentioned, the largest Finnish newspaper featured an editorial last year suggesting that in contemporary information-loaded working life everyone should learn from fans’ and nerds’ playful and passionate practices (Pullinen 2015). In the spirit of the expanding meaning of “nerd”, the conference papers discussed a wide range of fan phenomena, although the nerdy theme also meant that the focus tended to be on media fandoms at the expense of others, such as music or sport fandoms. Nevertheless, the conference demonstrated that contemporary nerdiness is an identity that intersects with other categories in complex ways; it is, for instance, gendered and generational.

### **From cult phenomena to transnational and transmedial practices**

The keynote lecture by the Finnish SF-fandom’s grand old lady Irma Hirsjärvi offered an overview of the developments in the field of fan studies both globally and nationally: in sum, from stigmatizing fans to overly positive excitement about fandoms to more nuanced and complex approaches to fannish activities that, among other things, take into account economical and political issues and varying fan trajectories. As Hirsjärvi noted, the first national conference in 2006 had mainly connected fandoms with cult phenomena. Since then the Finnish fandom studies have taken many forms, challenging the idea of fans as mainly excited enthusiasts, as in Hirsjärvi’s own work on Finnish SF-fans as a critical network. The so-called third-wave of fandom studies was present in the conference papers dealing with various media fandoms. Included were the political aspects of transmedial, transnational fan phenomena (Oskari Rantala on the “Hugo-gate” surrounding Hugo Awards in 2015), embodied, affective and gendered aspects of fan activities (Laura Antola’s and Heini Rönkkö’s talks on cosplay; Einari Ollikainen on bronies), the novel ways in which media houses recognize fans in their own products and commercial practices (Tanja Sihvonen & Melina

Wiik on Sherlock Holmes fandoms), and the complex power relationships and negotiations going on in between fans and anti-fans (Minna Siikilä on anti-fans of Christopher Paolini's *Eragon*).

Gaming studies were well represented at the event. The themes of transmediality and socio-political identities also characterized the papers on gaming cultures. The keynote by professor Frans Mäyrä paralleled Hirsjärvi's talk by offering an overview of the developments in game studies. Although the fields of fan and game studies have their distinctive features, there are definite similarities in the debates on whether fandoms/games are "real" culture or whether being a fan/gamer is something suspicious or individually and societally beneficial. Mäyrä's talk addressed both the empowering possibilities of gaming, such as individual identity work and social networking, as well as some of the negative aspects of gaming culture, including isolation, trolling and hate speech. Both the light and dark sides were reflected in the other papers on gaming culture. While the ways in which notions of a "gamer" are gendered and behaviours of perceived girls and women in games/as gamers are often heavily policed can be highly problematic (Usva Friman's and Maria Ruotsalainen's talks on (self-identified) female gamers), games have also inspired wholly new, creative transmedial fan practices occurring in both print and online media (Tero Kerttula on Let's Play narratives). As Mäyrä concluded, while gaming is certainly now a mainstream phenomenon, the debates about gamer identities may only become fiercer as the "real" gamers defend the perceived borders of their culture from casual trespassers. No surprise here – as subcultural studies have shown, the discourses of authenticity quickly occur with any subculture becoming "too" popular, especially among the wrong folks (which often equals feminisation).

The final panel of the conference brought together five researchers to discuss the politics and practices of identity in the margins of nerd/geek cultures. Different hierarchies and borders between types of fans are typical of fan cultures and to address these, the panel members talked about their on-going case studies on different marginal fan or nerd groups: anime fans (Anna Rantasila), bronies (Mikko Hautakangas, Sanna Lehtonen), furies (Tanja Välisalo), and hikikomoris (Eliisa Vainikka). In all cases the members of these groups both emphasize the playful or communal aspects of their practices but are also debating who is going too far in their activities – whether the latter involves going against hegemonic norms of gender, age or sexuality (anime fans, bronies, furies), or mainstream life politics of whole society (hikikomoris). The panel showed that exploring marginal fan practices enables a fruitful discussion of contemporary society more broadly – paying attention to margins and abnormality brings out the often invisible cultural norms related to identity practices and life politics. As several other talks also demonstrated, the politics and discourses circulating in societies at large – whether conservative or liberal, restricting or empowering – are reflected in fan cultures that, after all, exist in relation to the surrounding world. In this sense, fandom studies have a lot to contribute to contemporary discussions in social sciences and humanities.

### **From margins to mainstream – where next?**

While fan, nerd and gaming cultures are quickly spreading globally through various media and probably, at least to some extent, becoming part of the (Western) mainstream, the Finnish fandom studies seem to be well equipped to address the complex and often ambiguous phenomena related to transnational and transmedial fan practices. Fan, nerd and geek cultures clearly offer meaningful sites for playful identity work, yet, at the same time, issues of bullying, social rejection, and shame come up, both inside fandoms as well as in encounters between fan cultures and their outsides. Access to participatory culture is also limited by economical factors – as Mikko Hautakangas pointed out, more attention could be paid on the connections between fandoms and consumerist culture, as well as on who has access to fandoms in terms of economical wealth and race, for

instance. More research could also be done on older and/or ex-fans, nerds and gamers, to discuss life trajectories and generational differences.

In international fandom studies Anglophone and Japanese media fandoms have often been central (see e.g. Kustritz 2015) – they certainly were so at our Finnish event. As Hirsjärvi suggested in her talk, more comparative work could be done to explore how translocal fandoms are realized in local practices and what is the role of nationality in fandoms. I would add that we still know very little in general about fan practices outside Europe, North America and certain parts of Asia. Excitingly, some research has been tackling this, including The World Hobbit Project, an immense, global audience study with data from audiences in 46 countries; the Department of Art and Culture Studies in Jyväskylä is responsible for the project in Finland (<https://theworldhobbitprojectfinland.com/>).

While the conference offered a varied selection of portrayals of the 21<sup>st</sup> century nerd, as always with such short events, it also became obvious that many interesting topics were absent. Apart from the already listed ones, as the organisers themselves pointed out there were no talks, for instance, about (L)RPG fans, hackers or, indeed, computer nerds. There was a general agreement that we should keep up the tradition of the national conferences in fandom studies but it was still left undecided where, when and by whom the next one will be organized. The connections between technology, gaming/playing/playful culture and fandoms were raised as potential follow-up themes by this year's organisers. Tampere, we are looking at you.

Note: Anyone interested in fandom studies in Finland can sign up on the mailing list [fanitutkimus@lists.jyu.fi](mailto:fanitutkimus@lists.jyu.fi).

## Works Cited

Kustritz, Anne. "Transnationalism, Localization, and Translation in European Fandom: Fan Studies as Global Media And Audience Studies [editorial]." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, Vol. 19 (2015). n. pag. Web. 19 Apr. 2016.

Pullinen, Jussi. "Leiki töissä, ole utelias töissä ja innostu töissä – opi siis faneilta!" *Helsingin Sanomat* online, 29 Dec. 2015. n. pag. Web. 19 Apr. 2016.