Recent fan scholarship has produced a large body of work on the creative output of fans – this includes, for example, fanfiction, fanart, fanfilms, computer game modding, vidding and machinima (see Hellekson & Busse, 2006 for excellent discussions of the above).

Rarely, however, has the phenomena of fan comics been touched upon. This is perhaps due to the assumption that fan comics are a form of ‘fanart’ (fan-made images based on characters and scenarios from a particular fandom), and while it is true that fan comics fit into this category, it is also true that fan comics implement a narrative element using sequential images and text.

In interviewing two fan comic artists\(^1\), I hoped to gain some insight into why fans choose to create fan-based narratives through fan comics as opposed to other forms of fan creativity, and also to gauge the role that the everyday has to play in the impetus to create fan comics.

For the past two decades, there has been an increasing awareness of fan activity (and creativity) as a form of sense-making. Henry Jenkins (2012 [1992]) talks of a “meta-text” (p.98), the fan’s textual conception of the fandom as a whole entity. This meta-textual narrative is related to the idea of the ‘canon’ – that is, the events, characters, plots and settings which are officially presented by the source text. This canonical text supports the framework for fan-created content such as fanfiction and fanart.

The canon is therefore, in some sense, non-negotiable – it is ossified in the blockbuster movie, the hit TV show, the superhero comic, the romance novel. Yet the canon’s rigidity and cohesiveness is often in a state of flux. Take for example, the post-Fleming James Bond novels. Can they be considered canon?

To take superhero comics as an example, where writers have had only a relatively short tenure on a title, how can potential plot or character inconsistencies be reconciled? Or, turning to *The Matrix* film trilogy, there are many plot points that remain unseen by the audience, e.g. what happened to the Tank character between movies one and two? What is the backstory behind Morpheus and Niobe? How did Morpheus build his team on the Nebuchadnezzar?

These are all questions whose answers potentially fall outside of the canon. Fans, by nature,
prod and pry at these holes in the meta-textual narrative, which then become the basis of interpretive work, wherein they attempt to make sense of apparent holes and/or contradictions in the text.

Jenkins (1992), in reference to the TV show _Blake’s 7_, talks of fans appealing to “the primary text episodes, interviews with program producers, or general social and cultural knowledge to explore differences in the ways they make sense of the narrative events” (p. 211).

The effect of the fan’s general social knowledge on their sense-making behaviour is most relevant here, as such knowledge is formed by what we experience in the everyday.

According to a study by Chapin, Attfield and Okoro (2013), which evaluated the sense-making behaviours of witnesses in a court of law, narrative forms proved to be one of the most effective methods for making sense of complex and/or fragmentary information. Narrative structures allow us to more effectively elucidate difficult points, or to fill in gaps in knowledge via prior experience and what we know of the facts at hand. Fanfiction – and other forms of fan-generated storytelling, such as fanfilms – work on the same premise.

As Jenkins (2012 [1992]), talking now about _Star Trek: The Next Generation_, suggests:

> [Fans pool] the information explicitly given about the character on the aired episodes… to offer a succession of speculations designed to account for a perplexing gap in the narrative information. (pp. 101-102)

In short, narrative serves as an interpretive device, remedying inconsistencies in the source text and adding in what is missing. Fans are able to react to sources of frustration and mystery in the source text by creating their own narratives, which include fan comics and their unique combination of image and text.

**Levy**
LevyRasputin is an Italian fan artist that has been making fan comics for many years now. Her work covers several fandoms, from X-Men to Pacific Rim. Levy is not exclusively a fan comic artist. She also creates straight fanart and writes short fanfiction.

In an online interview I conducted with Levy, she emphasised her creation of fan comics as a way of “filling a narrative gap in the original source material and/or for telling a story”. This supports Jenkins’ and Chapin et al.’s theories of narrative as a sensemaking activity. But why comics, as opposed to any other form of narrative storytelling? In her answer, Levy expressed the urge to draw fan comics as an intense moment of inspiration:

My fancomic [sic] are the product of a concept that is better left as a slice of life/missing moment, all wrapped up in its intensity, rather than a single image or a story.

For Levy, fancomics were very much a way of fitting her creative urges into a limited time span – as a busy anthropology student, time is often of the essence. Fan comics appeal to her as they allow her to explore elements of story through minimal text and a focus on character body language. She describes fan comics as being born from a “pulse of a concept”, rather than a “flash of an image” (e.g. fanart), or “a plot” (e.g. fanfiction).

Despite the fantasy and sci-fi settings of many of her comics, in the main Levy’s art focuses on the everyday and the routine of the characters – adventure and action are rarely a part of her work. Instead, she focuses on the understated emotions (see figure 1 above), quiet interludes, domestic scenarios, and mundane moments of everyday life that we are most familiar with.
Levy adds:

I admit [...] that my personal belongings often makes guests start [sic] in my fanart and fancomic too, and that episodes from IRL [in real life] can be a catalyst of the creative process.

In the initial impetus for making her fancomics, the everyday is often a touchstone, a source of inspiration on which fans may draw in order to create their narratives. In many ways, the everyday is uniquely suited to the quick, pithy style embodied in the fan comic.

Jeanne

Jeanne (formerly ChibiJ) follows several fandoms, mainly in the videogame sphere, including the Assassin’s Creed and Mass Effect franchises. Unlike Levy, however, Jeanne’s fan comics focus on more humorous interludes, using a variety of media, including photo manipulations.

Her work is also distinctive as it is self-reflexive, using real life events which situate herself, her friends and family as characters in her comics. These narratives reflect on her life as a fan and how these tongue-in-cheek episodes bring meaning into her everyday life. Her work both justifies
and lampoons her status as a ‘fangirl’.

Like Levy, Jeanne also creates fanart, but says that she prefers “telling a short story of an experience rather than poster-style fanart […] they show how much I appreciate my gaming experiences.” Jeanne’s fan comics are firmly embedded in her everyday life experiences, a practice which began when she was living in Japan with a friend:

I started a comic of the same title 'e.r. Exact Representation', which chronicled the amusing things we got up to. Upon moving back to the UK, there were no more of these exotic moments, so I turned to 'gaming e.rs'.

For Jeanne, her videogame fandoms became part of the ‘exotic’ in her everyday life, providing rich moments that she crystallises into comic form. Her artwork comes from “[g]ames that I particularly love playing and their characters, comedic moments during gaming, fond memories and events that shocked, amused or inspired me. They also reflect my friendships, and the vast amount of 'in-jokes' that we have.”

Because the subject matter of her comics are so personal, Jeanne rarely shares her work with the wider public, choosing instead to share them with friends or family who are featured in her comics, or with those who understand her in-jokes. Creating comics is a hobby for Jeanne, and she has no interest in formally publishing her work:

I find the thought of a 'consumer' to my work, and the pressure to produce work that comes with it, against what I produce them for - personal pleasure.

For Jeanne, offering a work to a wider public would remove the experience of creating fan comics out of the everyday.

Fan comics, then, are not merely artworks read and written by the wider fan community. They are also reflected by and reflections of the personal lives of the artists. They can be personal pieces whose context takes meaning from the everyday, or exploratory narratives that explain the gaps in a fandom by referring to the artist’s everyday experience.

References


Jeanne, (2013), Personal image emailed to author 16th December 2013.


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1. Interviews took place online between 13-15 December 2013.